



PUBLIC LIBRARY

M. L.

801

Jones

J72

481509

How to criticize books

STORAGE

DO NOT REMOVE  
CARDS FROM POCKET

**PUBLIC LIBRARY**

FORT WAYNE AND ALLEN COUNTY, IND.



570

ALLEN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 1833 00331 9164

ANNEX

WITHDRAWN

2

21Ja

2

20A

15

25

158

3











# HOW TO CRITICIZE BOOKS

*By the same author:*

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: ESSAYS IN POETRY, CRITICISM  
AND PROSODY.

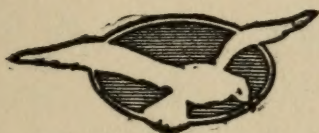


# HOW TO CRITICIZE BOOKS

*By*

LLEWELLYN JONES

*Literary Editor, Chicago Evening Post*



801  
J72

Bek + rd

*New York*

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC.  
*Publishers*

Copyright, 1928

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY, INC.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
FOR THE PUBLISHERS BY THE VAN REES PRESS



481509

To

SUSAN WARREN WILBUR

WHO READ THE MANUSCRIPT AND MADE MY WORDS  
CONFORM TO MY PRINCIPLES AND TO MY UNCON-  
SCIOUS COLLABORATORS, THE REVIEWERS OF THE  
CHICAGO "EVENING POST" LITERARY REVIEW.





# CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	xi
CHAPTER	
I. CREATIVE AND CRITICAL WRITING	17
II. TURNING THE SENTENCE: GRAMMAR, EUPHONY, STYLE . . . .	39
III. HOW AND WHY BOOKS ARE PUBLISHED . . . . .	61
IV. CRITICISM AND REVIEWING . . . .	70
V. A NOTE ON BIOGRAPHY . . . . .	89
VI. ÆSTHETIC CRITICISM—ART AND MORALS . . . . .	95
VII. CRITICIZING POETRY . . . . .	111
VIII. FICTION, SHORT STORY, DRAMA . . . .	132
IX. HOW TO COLLECT FACTS AND PREPARE PAPERS . . . . .	156
X. THE CRITIC'S OWN MIND . . . . .	166
APPENDIX I.—"DONT'S FOR REVIEWERS" . . . . .	181
APPENDIX II.—A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	189



"Morality I have defined above as the self-conscious living of life; more bluntly as knowing what you are doing. And therefore for me morality is intelligence. As a believer in intelligence I believe in analysis without end. I believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth, in letting your right hand know what your left hand is doing, and in letting no false respect for persons forbid an intimate analysis of motives, of your friend, your wife, your child, or your grandmother.—  
WARNER FITE in *Moral Philosophy: The Critical View of Life*.





## INTRODUCTION

CRITICISM is as old as civilization. It is even possible that the first human author set the fashion of dedicating his works "to my severest critic."

Book reviewing is a more recent activity, although it dates from the establishment of the first European periodicals. Within recent years however, the whole world has become literate and the criticism of books has been democratized. It is no longer the pontifical exercise it was in the days of the quarterly reviewers who are still thought by some people to have killed John Keats. It is now an informative activity, designed rather to enlighten the reader than to castigate or praise the author.

Criticism and book reviewing—we shall distinguish between them later—are, of course, but two aspects of a very wide, varied, and socially important kind of writing. And this book is intended not only for book reviewers but for that constantly growing class of people who contribute in any way to the criticism, guidance, or even the description, of what is going on in the world of thought. It is addressed to book reviewers, to those who are asked to read papers

before clubs, to teachers of English, and to persons who do not write but who read book reviews and who would like to know just what they are reading when they do so, and in what circumstances and with what ends in view those reviews are written.

The experience of which the book is an epitome includes fourteen years of writing criticism and editing the book reviews of a few hundred contributors to the Friday Literary Review of the *Chicago Evening Post*, as well as some experience in teaching expository writing and short story writing to university students. Teaching, that is to say, in the nominal sense of the word. For I confess that those persons who left my classes able to write fairly good English were the same who came into them already blessed with that ability. But that may have been less my fault than the fault of the situation. One way of teaching people to swim is to throw them into deep water—and they themselves apply the heuristic method. I learned to write English the same way. I left school at an early age and “got a job” as a reporter. When my writing was bad the chief reporter, under whom I worked, made such unpleasant remarks about my personality and ancestry that I was impressed with the inadvisability of this or that phrase or construction and did not repeat it. But one can hardly make such remarks in a university class room—and so one’s students are not properly impressed with



the badness of their writing. And they do not do enough writing in any one course to get anything like the necessary practice.

But why should their writing be bad in the first place? After all, we have all learned to talk and with the exception of certain common errors we talk, for the most part, grammatically and with a pleasant enough rhythm. But when we ask our words to wait until we can write them down they seem to misbehave. Unlike the queue outside a theater, they do not stand in their proper order, but mill around and get mixed. With many novices the self-consciousness involved in writing is their Nemesis. They talk well because they are hardly conscious that they are talking. But when they begin to write they become self-conscious and paralysis is induced. I have frequently aided students to get over that difficulty by telling them to forget that they were writing themes or reviews and to pretend that they were writing a letter to a friend. It is surprisingly effective.

There is a more serious reason why much writing is bad. It is built on a rickety foundation. Expository writing is the expression of thought, and unless we have thought a thing out clearly we cannot write about it. Many of our concepts and ideas go to sleep or even die a sort of natural death in our minds, without our knowing it because we can still recall the words which express those ideas—and so we never miss the idea behind

the word. For instance, the other day on the street I heard two people who looked fairly well educated, gravely discussing whether the moon went around the earth once a day or once a month. At some time they must have learned the facts of elementary astronomy, but they had taken the phenomena for granted for such a long time that when the question suddenly came up they had the words—earth, moon, orbit, etc.—but the idea had “died on them.” And during the period before the presidential election which impends as this book is being written, a native-born American in great perplexity asked me how it was possible that people were voting for Al Smith for president since no presidential election had been announced. Once, of course, that inquirer had known perfectly well the distinction between voting for pledged delegates to a party convention and voting for a presidential candidate after he has been nominated by those delegates; but, because the idea had not been recalled for a long time, it was in a state of suspended animation.

In any subject upon which you are called to write there will be a few points at which you still have the vocabulary but where the ideas are effaced; you may not be quite conscious of that, and you may think that your difficulty is one of expression, when it is really a confusion or dimness of ideas. Accordingly, in the following pages you will find very little about grammar



and words, and a great deal about thinking and organization. For when you think clearly enough, and arrange your thoughts in order, you have done the most of your writing. The rest is merely a matter of recording on paper what is already "written" in your mind.





# HOW TO CRITICIZE BOOKS

## CHAPTER I

### CREATIVE AND CRITICAL WRITING

I ONCE lectured before a woman's club on the poetry of Robert Bridges, and after the lecture a member of the audience explained the enthusiasm of herself and the other members for the poetry I had read to them. It seems that the month before Alfred Kreymborg had appeared on that platform, reading his own poetry, and among the pieces he read was "The Tree"—from his early volume, "Mushrooms." It is as follows:

I am four monkeys.  
One hangs from a limb,  
tail-wise,  
chattering at the earth;  
another is cramming his belly with cocoa-nut;  
the third is up in the top branches,  
quizzing the sky;  
and the fourth—  
he's chasing another monkey.  
How many monkeys are you?

That and other of Mr. Kreymborg's poems, I was told, did not rhyme and did not make sense. One lady remarked that she had thought at the time that if writing poetry were as easy as all that, she would go home and write a poem about a pig—which she had done, and thought it as good as anything Mr. Kreymborg had read, although she would never dream of calling it poetry. Another more belligerent lady remarked that there ought to be a law against reading such things in public or publishing them in books—and calling them poetry.

But that poem is after all rather simple. It is just the statement in a light and fanciful figure of a very elementary fact about human beings: that each of us is a number of beings. Had the same fact been stated in the language of psychology: that man is a thinking being, a questing being, and an animal with an animal's appetites, it would have been accepted as a platitude.

Suppose Gertrude Stein had appeared upon that platform and had read from her works. Suppose, to take a typical example, she had given a reading from "Geography and Plays" and had uttered the following cryptic sentences:

Eating and paper.

A laugh in a loop is not dinner. There is so much to pray.

A slight price is a potato. A slimness is in length and even in strength.



I can imagine much more indignation being evoked in the breasts of the audience than that which Mr. Kreymborg called forth. And yet Gertrude Stein has written book after book in that style, and some people seem to enjoy them. We must remember, too, that she is an educated woman, and presumably knows what she is about. I shall not quarrel with any reader of this book, however, who thinks that the above quoted sentences are nonsense. Only I would ask him if he does not think that, in some ways, the following sentence is also nonsense: "The picturization of developments is a most probable and correct analysis." My own opinion is that it is worse nonsense, because it is more obviously aiming to be sense. In the first place a picturization—that is a picturing or depicting—cannot, at the same time, be an analysis. In the second place, if it were an analysis and a correct one, it would not be a probable one—it would be certain.

## TWO FUNCTIONS OF WORDS

But the main point is not the comparative merits of these two gems of English prose: the point is rather that they are examples of prose used for two entirely different purposes. Miss Stein is what, in our current critical cant, we call a creative writer. That is to say, she is using language to create in the bosoms of other people certain intuitions or feelings or whatever you

want to call them, which will reproduce experiences which she herself has had. And if she tells us that certain reactions of her sensibility to experience, to the phenomena of the world, can only be expressed by the words just quoted, we are in no position to contradict her. However arbitrary or senseless they may seem to us, those words must have either an intellectual meaning or an emotional symbolism, for her. And if she chooses to unlock the secrets of her heart in that particular cipher, all we can do is to catch her meaning if we can, give it up if we can't.

John Stuart Mill once distinguished between poetry and oratory by saying that oratory is heard, poetry is overheard. Surely, the poem of Alfred Kreymborg, quoted above, is easy to overhear. But if we cannot overhear it, we must simply say, "This is not for me," and let it go at that.

But an orator—and this is true, too, of any critic or the reporter of any event, or the interpreter of it—addresses himself directly to other people. He cannot say, as Miss Stein might conceivably say: "I am expressing myself: Here I stand, I can do no other." It is his job to make himself understood by the average intelligent reader. And a great many amateur writers never learn this. They imagine that if they feel this or that way about a certain proposition, and if they set down certain words that come into their minds as a result of those feelings, that the sym-



pathetic reader will, from those words, come into possession of what they feel. Thus, a young man who was a disciple of New Thought once reviewed a book for me. I told him that he had a sentence which did not make sense. He read it over and said: "But that does make sense to me—that is just what I want to express. The reason you do not understand it is that you read it purely from your own narrow point of view. If you thought of my point of view as you read it, you would be able to follow me."

My answer was that, however sympathetically I might read it—knowing him personally—all that the readers of the paper would have to go by would be a succession of words, printed in lines on white paper. And that if they could not make sense out of those words, his personality, were it as deep as that of Socrates and as erudite as that of Einstein, would cut no figure at all.

In other words, if a writer wishes not merely to express himself, but to communicate his ideas to others, he must practice the strategy of "putting himself across." He has undertaken an activity which is no longer individual but social. He must have in his mind's eye as he writes not only the image of what he is writing about, but the image of his audience. If he is writing for children he must not use too many long words, or too complicated a sentence structure; if he is writing for a lay audience he must not use techni-



calities. If he is writing for any human audience, he must remember that attention flags, and that in consequence he must not write sentences much longer than the longest Henry James wrote in his later period. And of each word he must think not in terms only of what it means in the dictionary, or of what it means in a wider sense through his associations with it, but of what it will mean to this or that type of audience.

Hence we begin this study of critical writing by a short consideration of the purposes for which words are used. What is true of words used with one purpose is not true of the same words if used with another purpose.

In the first place words are used to express ideas. When some one tells us that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, we all agree with him, provided we know the dictionary meaning of the words he uses, but we do not get excited about it. If some one else wishes to tell us the same thing he will use substantially the same words. For, in any statement like that each word stands for a fact or entity or experience, and it stands for it definitely, without nuance and without doubt. This is the scientific and the practical use of language. In the most recent study of the subject, "The Meaning of Meaning," by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, such use of language is called symbolic, because each word is used as a "conventional" symbol of

an idea or fact, is always understood to be used in that sense and in no other, and hence each word symbolizes, or is a sign for, something in particular. The sign is once and for all determined upon, every one agrees to it, the same sort of a triangle is always meant when one says isosceles, and our thinking along scientific or technological or philosophical lines is successful, other things being equal, to the degree in which our vocabulary is used definitely and accurately.

But there is a quite different way of using words. Suppose we hear some one say: "The stars and stripes forever." You, dear reader, know just what that phrase means. But if words were only symbols in the sense given above—a sense, it should be noted, quite different from the literary sense of the word symbolism—we should not know what it meant. Because then, stars would be celestial bodies, stripes would be a number of things, from lines of color on a dress to welts on the back; and it would be rather absurd to juxtapose them in this way, and quite absurd to say that either would last forever—for we know that even the sun and the stars will hardly do that.

As a matter of fact we all know that here we are using "symbols" in an altogether different sense. Literally speaking, when we use that phrase we do not mean what we say. We use it not to put across an idea but to invoke an emotion or an attitude. The picture it evokes is of



the flag, and the flag in its turn stands for the American nation. But the phrase itself tells us nothing about America—beyond the fact that its flag has stars and stripes on it. Whoever hears the words "isosceles triangle" is enabled immediately to imagine a triangle of which certain statements are true. Whoever hears the phrase, "the stars and stripes," has to build up his own picture. If he be a Westerner he will build one picture, if an Easterner, another, if a foreigner, another. Furthermore a farmer's picture will not correspond to a soldier's picture. But while the phrase will convey no factual knowledge, it will evoke in every American citizen the same general type of emotion. That is its function.

At this point the reader may jump ahead, and say: Oh, yes, one of those uses of words is the prosaic, and the other is the poetic. And he will be only slightly precipitate if he does. Poetic language does come under the head of the second usage—which is called by Ogden and Richards in the book just mentioned, the emotive use of language. But the emotive use of language may be divided into the oratorical, as in the above instance of the stars and the stripes, where the emotive effect is gained by a symbolism which is often arbitrary; and the poetic, where the emotive effect should be gained by the natural powers and associations of the word. To that topic, however, we shall return later.



## LANGUAGE AND CONFUSION

For the present our concern is to keep the two main distinctions in mind and to note what havoc is wrought in critical writing when the two uses are confused. The worst offenders are undoubtedly the politicians. During a municipal campaign in Chicago at a time when the uncertain status of the street car lines and elevated railways was very much in the air, one candidate for the mayoralty made his whole campaign on the question of generalized patriotism. He asked the citizens to vote for "America First." Now that phrase was meant to evoke an attitude and it did—but it was accompanied by appeals which pretended to be appeals to thought. And so the voters were "kidded" into thinking that they were thinking when in reality they were having an emotional debauch.

But the danger of this confusion is not confined to its utilization by politicians. It comes in subtler guises. Words with religious connotations which find their way into philosophical disputations are one instance. Another instance is the intrusion of such words into what ought to be definitions. I shall go into this point in some detail because all fruitful expository or critical writing depends on proper definition of the terms employed.

## WHAT IS A DEFINITION?

We all read some poetry and some of us have to criticize it from time to time. And we have all heard people say: "Well, that may be interesting but it is not what I call poetry." So we hunt around for a definition of poetry. Now in order to define poetry you must not only have a rough idea of its limits, but you must know what a definition is. A chapter could be written on just what constitutes a definition. But I shall simply say that a definition of anything must be a short, concise description of what the thing is, the wording of which must exclude all that the thing is not; that it must give us the essential qualities of the thing—that is, the qualities which distinguish every example of the thing, and not merely the qualities which may distinguish some examples of it; and that, therefore, it must not admit of exceptions. In short, a definition draws a boundary line between things in this class and things not in it. So that if, for instance, you believe that a thing is boundless or infinite you must not hope to be able to define it. Thus to endeavor a definition of God would be a hopeless task.

How then, shall we define poetry? In so far as the spirit of man is infinite and poetry is an expression of the spirit of man, the task would appear hopeless, and J. W. Mackail has even written a lecture on the "Definition of Poetry" in



which he says, after examining a number of attempts, that ultimately poetry is indefinable. But ultimately, everything is indefinable. Cannot we arrive at a proximate definition? He quotes a number of attempts, some of which fail because the maker had an inadequate idea of what poetry is, some of which fail because he had forgotten what a definition is. For instance, Coleridge says that prose (in the sense of good prose) is words in the best order; poetry is the best words in the best order. Now that may be a suggestive note on poetry and prose but it is not a definition of poetry as opposed to prose because it does not distinguish between the two. A piece of perfect prose would certainly be the best words in the best order. Indeed you might even say that a doctor's prescription, if it worked in a very serious illness, must have been the best words in the best order—and yet it is hardly even prose, let alone poetry. A similar mistake is made by those people who think that Matthew Arnold defined art when he said that art was a criticism of life. Some art happens to be a criticism of life, but the most drastic criticism of life I know of is suicide—and suicide would hardly be called one of the fine arts, although murder has been so spoken of.

Toward the end of this essay Mr. Mackail tries his own hand at what he might or might not call a definition of poetry. It runs as follows:



Essentially a continuous substance or energy, poetry is historically a connected movement, a series of successive integral manifestations. Each poet, from Homer to our own day, has been to some extent and at some point, the voice of the movement and energy of poetry; in him poetry has for the moment become visible, audible, incarnate, and his extant poems are the record left of that partial and transitory incarnation. The progress of poetry is immortal.

Those are eloquent words, and they make a decided appeal to our emotions. They unroll before us a vast historical progress—but are they a definition? I do not think so, for in the first place they express a theory of poetry rather than a definition of it. If you happen to be a platonist, you will agree with the theory. Otherwise you will not. And here is the test of the applicability of those words as a definition: With them in mind ask yourself whether the words quoted from Kreymborg at the beginning of this chapter qualify as poetry, or whether the “Spoon River Anthology” does so. Do they throw any light on the question? I doubt it.

The trouble comes from mixing scientifically symbolic language and emotive language. It is the same trouble which allowed the editor of a magazine of belles-lettres some time ago to offer a prize for “the best definition of poetry which

shall itself be beautiful." Well, using the word beautiful in the sense in which he meant it, the thing cannot be done. On the other hand, if you say that the sight of the adaptation of means to an end is beautiful, then the only beautiful definition of poetry is one which is obviously doing what a definition should. And one writer has produced such a definition. Lascelles Abercrombie, in his "The Theory of Poetry," after—and it is significant that it is after and not before—examining the characteristics of poetry, gives us this definition:

It is the expression of imaginative experience, valued simply as such and significant simply as such, in the communicable state given by language which employs every available and appropriate device.

I can hear certain objections—in fact, I heard some of them when I first read this definition to a university class. One objection was based upon a sheer misunderstanding. A student said that some poetry dealt with facts and was realistic, and that therefore to confine the definition to "imaginative experience" was too narrow. She was confusing the words "imaginative" and "imaginary." Any other objections that occur to the reader will be answered if we subject the definition to the process known as explication: that is, to expand its terms so that what is im-



plicit in each term is explicitly stated—and whether a definition is a real one or not can always be found by explicating it. So here goes:

### UNFOLDING A DEFINITION

Poetry is the expression, that is, the realizing or setting forth, of any sort of experience that can be imagined, held up and looked at, so to speak, in terms of the imagination, that is, in terms of images, visual, auditory, or what not, or even to some extent without the aid of sense images, though poetry as a rule does work through images. And this experience, so held in the mind's eye must be valued simply as such: that is to say, it must be interesting and moving, just as something to contemplate, and its value must be a value for contemplation—thus the rhyme beginning "Thirty days hath September . . ." is ruled out because it is not interesting as a thing to contemplate but is valued because it enables us to achieve the practically important duty of keeping clear as to the number of days in each month. Furthermore, this expression has to be in a communicable state and the means of making it communicable must be a linguistic means—which differentiates poetry from painting, also the expression of imaginative experience valued simply as such. Finally the language has to be one which employs every available and appropriate device—that is to say, not simultaneously but,



as they are needed, rhyme, meter, cadence, stanza form, assonance, alliteration, vowel music, accent, quantity, and so on. This part of the definition differentiates poetry from prose, which foregoes a number of those elements; and it also enables the definition to include free verse, which also foregoes some of them but which uses others consciously—while in prose certain of those “devices,” such as the intrusion of regular meter, are accidental.

That, it seems to me, is a bullet-proof definition of poetry, and in its light we can say that Alfred Kreymborg’s “The Tree” is poetry as is Mr. Masters’ “Spoon River Anthology.” A very conservative person who loved Tennyson and disliked realism might say that he did not like “Spoon River Anthology”—and there is no power in that definition to make any one like a thing he is not prepared to like. No one person likes every poem he reads or even every sort of poetry. Nor can that definition give us a touchstone for good poetry or poetry that is not so good—only the education of our taste can help us there. But it is a good working definition which will save us much confusion if we ever get into one of those tiresome arguments as to what poetry is or is not. You might also quote it to those pseudo-romantic people who tell you that what Alexander Pope wrote was not poetry. Of course what they really convey in that remark

is that they happen not to get the kind of enjoyment from his poetry that they were expecting to get.

And you can use it as a basis for the criticism of any poetry you may read. For instance I once read what looked like a poem on the printed page, what was called a poem—it rhymed—and what most of its readers accepted as a poem. I am sorry that I cannot quote it now. But its “argument” or thesis was in part that the writer would rather be poor and healthy, like the proverbial beggar, than be rich and powerful, like the equally proverbial king, because the beggar had a good digestion while the king—at least the one described—had no digestion at all. Now that was not an expression of imaginative experience, because, if the writer had not been repeating a facile and foolish aphorism, had he really held in his imagination the figure of a beggar—penetrating the reality of his situation—he would know that it would be extremely unlikely that such a person, eating irregularly and any sort of food, would have a good digestion. On the other hand had he really envisaged the life of a king, he would know that his importance to the public life of his realm would be great enough to ensure very good care being taken of his health. In other words, this writer was not giving us the expression of imaginative experience, but was juggling with words.



## WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The importance of definition comes out very strongly in the discussion and criticism of all works dealing with thought, science, public affairs. How many people, for instance, who denounce Socialism know the difference between Socialism and Anarchism? I have even seen Socialism, Anarchism and the Nonpartisan League all lumped together by a federal judge in an interview in which he condemned them all impartially. And how often, in a paper on Socialism do you see a writer failing to distinguish between Marxian Socialism, Utopian Socialism, Christian Socialism and Fabianism. A term truly applied to Marxian Socialism might be false if applied to Fabian Socialism. Sometimes you will see an article which begins by talking of Socialism in one of those senses and then without any indication of a change in meaning of the terms used, ends up by criticizing Socialism in one of those other senses. Which, of course, renders the whole argument fallacious.

All this belongs to the realm of definition. But such words as Socialism, Anarchism, Bolshevism, Sovietism are also used emotively. That is to say by patriotic speakers as a means of arousing attitudes of fear and disgust. Therefore, if you are writing an article on Socialism, suppose it to be an historical article, where you wished to appeal



to the intellect of your readers, you would have to be careful not to speak in such a way as to arouse their emotions instead. And if you did not define the sort of Socialism you were dealing with, you would probably have those emotions evoked at the very start, and your ratiocination would be wasted.

Of course, in this connection it has not been necessary to define the various sorts of Socialism, nor have we defined individualism. But that word too is used in many senses intellectually, besides being used emotively. Indeed, there is a whole class of words, including those just mentioned, the word Christian, and such words as the good, the true, the beautiful, that are predominantly emotive in their appeal to the average reader.

I do not wish it to be understood from the above that I condemn the emotive use of language. I only condemn it when it is used unwittingly—whereby much damage may be done to the writer's own argument—or when it is used unworthily, for ulterior purposes. Even the artificial sort of symbolism often involved in emotive writing—such as saying "the stars and stripes" when we mean America—is justified where it is understood.

In all writing that appeals to the emotions, words are used in this double sense, but the emotive element far from being artificial is implicit

in the word. This aspect of language has nowhere been better treated than by the English critic, Arthur Ransome, in his "Portraits and Speculations." Instead of speaking of symbolic (in the scientific sense) and emotive language, he speaks of kinetic and potential language—using an analogy from physics. A kinetic word is one which has a definite meaning—a denotation—and which gives us that and nothing more. For instance: an isosceles triangle. All of us who have studied Euclid know what that phrase means: we can picture it in our minds, and that is all there is to it.

### WORDS AND GOOSEFLESH

Now for a potential word—that is a word which carries energy in excess of the energy of its mere dictionary meaning. Suppose you approach two people who are in conversation, and when you come up, you hear one of them exclaim "Ghastly!" Although you have no idea what has caused him to say that you will feel some sort of shock—you will fear something, even though you do not know what it is. And the reason for that is not that you know, by the dictionary, that the word ghastly means "horrible, frightful, shocking." For if the word horrible had been used you would not have had the same feeling. The reason is largely because, as



that word is uttered, the semi-conscious or even unconscious attempt to give value to the "h" in the word, causes the speaker to make the same sort of throat movement as he would if he had been terrified and gasped in fear. Even when this word is used on the printed page, especially in poetry, which we read more carefully than we do prose, it has this power. And so well are the poets aware of this quality sometimes possessed by our spelling, of giving expressive character to a word that when the English spelling reformers proposed to save the time and energy of school children by spelling that particular word "gastly," Mr. Abercrombie protested that they would ruin the word for the purposes of the poet—they would take the power, the potential, out of it and leave it a mere dictionary symbol.

In poetry, of course, many elements apart from the character of the word itself will give potential energy—stanza form, cadence, etc. And Mr. Ransome points, as an example, to Blake's:

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry . . .

—and indeed he might well have added to the effect by using Blake's original spelling of "Ty-



ger." As we all know that is the first stanza of one of the greatest lyrics in the English tongue. Stanza form, cadence, many factors help to put over the sinister suggestion of Blake's vision. But, says Mr. Ransome, if we reduce the statement to purely kinetic speech, what have we? He answers: "The kinetic base of that stanza is only the proposition to a supposed tiger of a difficult problem in metaphysics."

In imaginative prose, potential values cannot be put over by stanza form and rhyme, but they are nevertheless put over by means too numerous to analyze—not that analysis of those means would be of any use, for we could not use them merely because we had them classified. It is not the addition of this bit of technique to that bit that makes good writing, but the unconscious use of the means which are dictated to the sincere artist by the nature of the subject.

There is one other point to be made about potential speech. No matter how much the writer is aiming at potential values he will fail utterly to achieve them unless he has some kinetic basis. A penumbra is a beautiful and suggestive thing, but you cannot have a penumbra without a core of solidity from which it is born. We have all read poems full of high-sounding words but quite devoid of meaning. Only the sentimentalist would be deceived by them. And while it is perfectly legitimate for the critic, especially when

he is writing of things which are more than utilitarian, to wish to persuade, to infect with his own joy, he can never do this unless there is a rational, intellectual basis for his emotional flights.

## CHAPTER II

### TURNING THE SENTENCE: GRAMMAR, EUPHONY, STYLE

MOST of us have forgotten our English grammar, and the loss is much less serious than that of a leg or arm. Indeed, I never could understand English grammar until after I had learned Latin grammar—a commentary less upon my intelligence than upon the methods of teaching the subject in vogue thirty years ago.

What we know about correct speaking we learn by example, both from the spoken and from the written word. And most of us speak correctly enough except when we wish to specify a class of objects, when, almost invariably, we say “those kind of”—so often, indeed, that H. W. Fowler in his extraordinarily good book, “A Dictionary of Modern English Usage”—hereby recommended as a complete liberal education in word-consciousness—throws up his hands and remarks in effect, “Oh, let’s let it go.” Of course those few of us who are quite illiterate have a habit of saying “I would of gone” when we mean “I should have gone,” but the “of” is really an oral slur rather than a grammatical error—al-



though I once saw an example of it perpetrated in print.

But when it comes to writing, people who can speak correctly are plagued by some little demon of stage-fright or self-consciousness, and they fumble. I believe that if such people wrote rapidly and almost without thinking—or perhaps pretended that they were writing a personal letter, and then revised their writing in cold blood, they would get on much better than by watching their grammar as they go along.

Curiously enough such people usually remember two grammatical rules, and to make up for their general ignorance obey these two rules slavishly. And, what is almost more curious, both the rules are wrong when taken absolutely. One of them is that we should never split an infinitive; the other that we should not end a sentence with a preposition.

The first rule is an example of our payment of tribute to Latin in the formulating of our own grammar. The Latins however could not split an infinitive because their infinitive was in one word. We can—but ought we? Usually it makes a tidier sentence if one does not—and it also gives notice to one's readers that one knows what an infinitive is. But as Mr. Fowler points out in the book mentioned above, the people who try too hard to keep their infinitives undivided and whole, often ruin their sentences. In the first

place they often mistake something else for an infinitive. Mr. Fowler points out that "to really understand" is a split infinitive, but "to be really understood" is not a split infinitive, for the infinitive there is "to be." The meticulous but uninformed writer, in his effort not to split, writes a sentence like this: "He was proposed at the last moment as a candidate likely generally to be accepted"—spoiling the natural order and rhythm of the sentence, whereas "likely to be generally accepted" is quite correct.

A split infinitive is often preferable to the sort of rhythm obtained by unsplitting it. Thus Mr. Fowler quotes: "Both Germany and England have done ill in not combining to forbid flatly hostilities."

And lastly the sense of the sentence requires that the infinitive shall be split to avoid ambiguity. Thus to say: "Our object is to further cement trade relations" is quite clear. There are two methods of unsplitting that infinitive, and each of them will give a possible change in the meaning of what is said: "Our object is further to cement trade relations"—that is, further to cement relations which already exist—and: "Our object is to cement further trade relations"—in which the relations already existing are to be extended. Of course, in speaking, the intonations of the voice would take care of those ambiguities, but in writing exactitude can be gained at times



only by a strict attention to the order of words and phrases.

The other rule is—as one person put it—“that a preposition is a bad word to end a sentence with.” Here again it is a question of undue deference to Latin. The Latins did not end sentences with prepositions—but the Scandinavian speakers and writers always did. And as Havelock Ellis has pointed out in his essay on “The Art of Writing” in “The Dance of Life,” there is Scandinavian blood in England, and there are Scandinavian elements in the English language. Not the common people alone but Addison, who came from Scandinavian stock, kept that feature of the mother tongue and offended the sciolists of his day by writing sentences which ended with prepositions—an example which Havelock Ellis brings forward not only in defence of the “post-habited” preposition but of the proposition that a man’s style is less a matter of consciously learned grammar than of his biological inheritance.

Here again the rule must be one of common sense and economy. It is obviously better to say: “People worth talking to” than to say “People with whom it is worth while to talk.” And Robert Bridges, in one of his essays published by the Society for Pure English, gives us a warning from the other point of view—that we must not put too many prepositions at the ends of our sentences. He quotes the following as his horrible example:



Sick girl (to her nurse): I want to be read to.

Nurse: What book do you want to be read to out of?

Girl: "Robinson Crusoe."

Nurse cannot find that book so she brings the next best thing, "The Swiss Family Robinson."

Girl: "What do you bring me that book to be read to out of for?"

A point of even greater importance than grammar is rhythm. While deliberate attempts at fine prose rhythm may be left to the conscious artist in creative prose—and often he, too, overdoes it—the written word should read easily and fluently. For even if we do not read sub-vocally but apparently with the eye only, we are in fact using to some degree a metronome based on our throat muscles or our heart beats—the whole subject is a vexed one—and we must have balance in our sentences or we cannot read with any degree of comfort. We all know what good rhythm in prose is, by experience, whether or not we can explain what makes it good—we all know this for we have all read at least some parts of the Bible. A good test of one's own sentences is to read them out loud.

For examples of what may be called the mechanics of euphony the reader is referred to the chapter on reviewing poetry. But he should re-

member that in the most precise prose, the manner of his saying a thing is going to influence the reader's mind. The smoothest and most pacific remark, made in a knotty and harsh-sounding sentence will of course be the same thought, but the emotional effect proper to the thought will be displaced by one of irritation, and the reader will be predisposed to reject the thought.

Even that is true only in the gross, so to speak. For a thought of any subtlety can have but one exact counterpart in words—manner and matter are identical in all fine writing. A. C. Bradley gives an amusing example of this precept in his "Oxford Lectures on Poetry." He quotes two lines from Byron:

"A horse," he cried. A horse was brought.  
In truth he was a noble steed.

How could we change the form of those two lines, he asks, leaving their sense the same. Obviously by interchanging the only two words in the lines which are synonymous:

"A steed," he cried. The steed was brought.

In truth he was a noble horse.

—and it is very apparent that we have changed the whole sense of the passage—for now we have produced for the impatient hero not a high stepper but a nag!



As I do not wish to repeat in this book things which are easily accessible elsewhere I shall refer the reader who feels that he needs help in the mechanics of writing to the earlier chapters of "The Art of Writing" by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, and in particular to his illuminating chapter on "Jargon," defined as a fuzzy filling in of one's writing with words or phrases which mean nothing at all. For instance:

"In the case of John Jenkins, the deceased, the coffin provided was of the usual character"—from a report of a Board of Guardians.

Mr. Quiller-Couch is annoyed that there should be a case here as well as a coffin, for the only case Mr. Jenkins had was the coffin. He also objects to being told twice that Mr. Jenkins was dead—the "deceased" being something that the reader will be able to guess for himself when he learns that the gentleman is being provided with a coffin, and he is sure that a mistake was made in reporting that the coffin was of the usual character—for coffins, he says, do not have characters.

One piece of jargon that Mr. Quiller-Couch notes without explaining is of interest both because so many people use it and because it shows how a phrase begins its life honestly, meaning what it says, and then loses its character—becoming a cheat. That phrase is "the psychological moment" which most people use as equivalent to the critical moment or the dramatic moment.

The phrase is a translation of one used by the Germans during the Franco-Prussian war—not our recent misunderstanding but that of 1870. It had no relation to a moment of time at all, but referred to a “moment” in the physicist’s sense of the word. In the complicated “parallelogram of forces” bearing upon Paris during the siege there was the “moment” or factor of artillery, that of starvation, a number of others, and then, that of morale—called by a military writer the “psychological moment.” The phrase was translated into English, the word moment misunderstood, and thousands of lazy reviewers were given a nice piece of jargon to use whenever the husband caught the villain kissing his wife, or the hero discovered the stolen bonds.

### VOCABULARY

Many beginning writers read the dictionary every day in order to increase their vocabulary. That is a bad practice, comparable to a nation raising more and more soldiers for defence—soon there are so many that it seems only fitting to use them. The young reviewer, proud of knowing more words than Shakespeare did, wishes to use them. And he does—often with terrible effect. Not that I advocate ignorance—if you could read something every day which gave you a new idea that would be a different matter, and you would get the new word along with the new



idea. And if you do happen to learn the word "xenophobia," as I did, just a day or so before writing a review of a book about the restriction of immigration and the persecution of aliens, that is just a piece of luck. But it may not do you much good even so. For instance, having just learned the word, I had to use it in the heading I wrote for that review—and it may have scared away a number of readers.

When he tells us, however, to avoid words of Latin or Greek derivation when possible, Mr. Quiller-Couch is probably thinking of creative writing where ordinary life is being described—or transcribed. In dealing with current ideas, we cannot live up to that. For though our tongue may be predominantly Anglo-Saxon in its vocabulary dealing with common life, birth, adventure, and death, in affairs of the mind, in science, in philosophy, it draws from Greek and Latin.

### MEANINGS AND METAPHORS

A great deal of bad writing is due to knowing words and not knowing their meaning. From one review I picked out the two following phrases: "illogical mannerisms"—which gives one the feeling of trying to multiply two cats by five cabbages—and "false illusion" which might, by some divine accident, be equivalent to a true vision. In each case the writer is using words

whose meaning he would know if he stopped to bring the knowledge into his consciousness—but he does not do that. He is too busy writing.

And even more bad writing is due to the fact that the writer is using words—not ideas or pictures. As long as each word means, vaguely, something to him, he assumes that it will mean something to the reader. Hence he does not hesitate to remark: "The book is simply flooded with vivid pictures." Now, if he had really stopped to visualize the pictures he would hardly have said that the book was flooded with them, unless he were trying very subtly to intimate that they were water-colors. Here is a more complicated example. Of a book entitled "The Quiet Lady" the reviewer said:

As *mellow* as its title is this *soft* and *rippling* story of a Scotch lassie's love. But it *pulses* with an *undercurrent* of beautiful human passion.

The italics are mine, and they serve to bring out the very delicate balance of the molecules of that book. It is, one will notice mellow and soft—soft enough to ripple, in fact, and yet consistent enough not to flow away but to pulse—a motion of return in each wave, in other words; and yet complexly constructed so that while it ripples and pulses there is also an undercurrent. The sort of dance, indeed, that an intoxicated



nebula might indulge in while trying to live up to the laws of two geometric systems at the same time.

Bad writing in another sense results when the reviewer mixes straight comment on a book or on an idea with his own personal contributions. In the following instance that sort of bad writing is mixed with the more elementary kind of bad writing just described. The writer is discussing a book about Lafcadio Hearn, in which an early essay of Hearn's is reprinted. It deals with the unpopularity of truth:

. . . and it will give many an appreciative chuckle to my friend Robert Hillyer, not to say H. L. Mencken, for in it Hearn makes a clever thrust at the degeneracy of truth in these modern days. Truth has been decomposing for a long time, it seems, and Hearn is not the first or the last to complain of the corrosions made on it by the advancing boots of time. I remember passages in "The Adventurer" written by John Hawkesworth about 1750, whose complaint was that things aren't to-day as they were yesterday, and the change has been largely for the worse. Poor Hawkesworth! Poor Hearn! And poor Hillyer! Always in revolt and seldom finding more than a few to revolt with them. Add this reviewer's name to the slender scroll.

Quite aside from the evident value attaching to the work of any one who pauses in the hurrying street to rescue a great writer's stray words from oblivion under the hurrying wheels of commerce, we have in Albert Mordell's fine book . . . etc.

Possibly the horrible metaphors strike us first. The advancing boots of time may do much to truth but they certainly do not corrode it—corrosion is always due to chemical action, erosion is a wearing away by mechanical forces, and all an advancing boot can do is to kick or to squelch. And presumably if the truth was pretty well decomposed anyway it would squelch all the more easily and messily. But as a matter of fact truth is truth and we are told that in the long run it always prevails—so we may doubt whether it was really decomposed to begin with. The writer is using the word truth for some such idea as the love of truth—which may quite conceivably decay in degenerate days.

But the worst fault of that extract is its egotism and lack of balance. To line up the little known Hawkesworth, Lafcadio Hearn, and the not conspicuously revolutionary poet Robert Hillyer as the torch bearers of truth through the ages, and then add one's self is grotesque in the extreme. And to predict what will make Mr. Mencken chuckle is quite gratuitous.

Lastly, words dealing with the same situation



or aspect of affairs should be in one sentence, and when the subject is changed the sentence should be closed and a new one begun. Thus, the character of a book, its "message"—to use an over-worked word that we must not use again—is one thing. It is in the realm of literature. The binding of the book is not a literary matter at all but a question of manufacture and commerce. And so I dislike it when I am editing copy and come across such a concatenation, as the following, which concerns an anthology of uplifting sentiments:

"Bound in fabricoid, decorated in gold, it commands attention and receives a meed of devotion."

All these errors could be avoided by the simple rule of visualizing every pictorial metaphor used, thinking of the concrete meaning, in terms of its substance and properties, of every concrete noun used, and remembering that categories are not interchangeable. If you start an example in arithmetic in terms of cows you cannot finish it in yards.

### BEGINNING A REVIEW

We have all watched a timid bather approach the water, dip in one foot, find it cold, hesitate, dip in the other foot, run in a little way, stop,

and only after a series of such maneuvers really dare to get under the water.

I see that same process time after time repeated by young reviewers. They have read the book, possibly thought about it, and are now ready to write the review. They know in a general way what they are going to say about the book. But how to begin? They flounder and fumble, until at last they are started—and then they forget to remove from the review, when they read it over, those preliminary flounderings.

The general pattern of this floundering is that of the loose and meaningless generality. A recent reviewer of a work of history began:

To the minds of many persons a book which is a history connotes something very dry, very statistical and very easy to be avoided. "Rum, Romance and Rebellion" is anything but dry, has just the needed amount of statistics and dates to convince the reader of its authenticity, and should be very much sought after by persons interested in early American history. . . .

The first sentence is quite unnecessary. That a history connotes statistics to the average person surely cannot be so. In any event such a "connotation" would be quite unjustified in view of the manner in which history is written to-day. Coming down to the second sentence—which at



least has the merit of talking about the book under review—statistics and dates would never convince a reader of the authenticity of a book. Have we not all heard that there are lies, damned lies, and statistics?

It is typical of the floundering reviewer to begin with a generality. You give him a detective story and he begins his review by saying:

In a day when we are swamped with sex-ridden problem novels—which he discusses for a sentence or two—we cannot be too grateful for a book of wholesome recreative value. . . .

Or you give him a biography and he begins by saying that usually biographies are very dull and dry, but that this one is an exception.

Here is an example where the reviewer has not—if the metaphor may be used—quite got his engine warmed up, and so we have bad writing:

There are women writers and women writers, and, for the best distinction, they may be known as those who are indifferent, and those who have a definite passion to expound.

Here is a quite gratuitous flourish on the theme, purely personal it would seem, of the reviewer's feelings:

There is nothing more discouraging, from a reviewer's point of view, than to find the essence of a good story wrapped up in poor literary and verbal form.

So say we all—but why not take it for granted? And what is the distinction between verbal form and literary form—in a book?

Sometimes the enthusiasm which the reviewer should control and express all through his review gets out of hand and bubbles over into the first paragraph, making an awful mess:

This is one book in a thousand. And four counts are in the foregoing indictment. In the first place, the plot is artificial and weakly woven. Secondly the characterization is reel, not real. Thirdly, the style is not vigorous enough to be more than ordinarily readable. And, in the fourth place, in spite of all these handicaps, "Monsieur of the Rainbows" is the most enjoyable and delightful novel I have read in six years.

Let us first of all express our pity for those six years, if a book with all those faults is the best our reviewer has been able to find in that time; and then, putting pity to one side, let us look at what he has written. In the first place, until the reader has been told something about the book he is, and quite laudably, completely indifferent as



to whether the style is good or bad, or the characterization for that matter.

In fact he does not know what the writer is talking about. And if he is a critical reader he may suspect that the reviewer does not know either. The statement that this is one book in a thousand is not an indictment. Therefore it cannot contain four counts. And if it did the fourth so-called count is not one, but is a pardon for the other three.

I have said that many of these fumbling beginnings consist of generalizations. In many instances a book is written to illustrate or make a generalization, or in some ways, perhaps not foreseen by the author, it leads the reviewer into making a generalization. In such cases it is a perfectly legitimate thing to begin the review with a general statement of some sort. But more often the general statements should be at the end of the review. Having said this I pick up at random a copy of the London *Times* Literary Supplement—which is notable for the excellence of its unsigned but authoritative reviews—to see how far it bears me out. I turn to its fiction reviews. Here are their openings:

Miss Willa Cather has written a long short story on the theme of the hostility a woman may feel for a man she profoundly loves.

Miss Sylvia Thompson gives a feeling of profound security in the first page of "The

Battle of the Horizons" that rouses high expectations. Scenery, dialogue, character-analysis all have a placid fullness that loses nothing from a style pleasantly reminiscent in manner of Henry James, and employed on the kind of problem in which James took zest.

A quotation from "The Jew of Malta" prefacing Miss H. du Coudray's exceptional first novel "Another Country" briefly sums up its theme but with a cynicism that is entirely absent from the book itself.

Each of these beginnings, it will be noticed, brings the reader immediately into contact with what goes on in the book. Here is a beginning which does not so much do that as it raises an even earlier question—what the reader will think when he sees the title:

Some may be induced to read, some may be deterred from reading, "Daughters of India" by Margaret Wilson by a hope, or by a fear, that it may continue the revelations of "Mother India."

Here is a beginning, from another issue, where a generalization is warranted by the light it throws on the nature of the work reviewed:



There has been some evidence of a most laudable reaction among the abler English writers of this generation against the tendency of the powerful American editor to formalize the short story, tie it down by rules of construction and limit the choice of theme by insisting upon a recognizable "plot." Mr. Walter de la Mare, Katherine Mansfield, and Mr. A. E. Coppard have in very different manners developed characteristic methods in this form, demonstrating its vitality; and now Mr. Gerald Bullett in his new collection to which he has given the title of "The World in Bud" is again shown by his work also to be in revolt against the stereotyped and the machine-made.

The review goes on to say that so far Mr. Bullett has not achieved the success of those older writers mentioned in the introduction. And let us note that if this were not a collection by a younger and less competent member of that revolting group, the generalized introduction would not have been so fitting. Thus it would have sounded ill-balanced to say, of a book of stories by Walter de la Mare, that there is a revolt against the standardized story; A. E. Coppard and Katherine Mansfield have developed a more flexible and atmospheric form, and now in these stories by Walter de la Mare we have more of the same. For there the reader's first in-

terest would be in what Mr. de la Mare was doing rather than in schools and tendencies.

The generalized beginning will be used more often in non-fiction than in fiction reviews, and more often in impersonal writings than in biography. Thus in these same issues of the *London Times Literary Supplement* we find the following beginnings:

Of a book dealing with the origins of the war:

We hear nowadays much about history as a science. It is the duty of the historian carefully to guard himself against allowing his judgment to be biassed by national or other prejudice; in his narrative and in the general conclusions which are based upon his narrative he must confine himself strictly to that which can be proved by the written evidence available. The ideal put before us is one difficult to attain, especially in regard to a matter so recent and so closely bound up with national feelings as the origins of the War. Most of what has been written on this subject is frankly partisan and propaganda. This was natural enough with regard to nearly everything which was written during the course of the War, and it is equally true of the innumerable works and articles which have in the later years been published in Germany.



This is justified because it reminds the reader of the motivating circumstances in which such books as this are written and it also exhibits the scales in which any such books must be weighed—the reviewer then goes on to weigh the book in question.

Sometimes, of course, generalization and particular instance may be combined in one sentence:

If, as we believe, history is the greatest and the most thrilling of all romances, one must be grateful to Sir Arnold Wilson for giving us what he modestly calls “an historical sketch of the Persian Gulf. . . .”

Philosophical books will naturally call very often for a generalized beginning to their reviews. Here is the introduction to a review of C. E. M. Joad’s “The Future of Life”:

There is a sort of philosophy, hovering on the verge of myth and perhaps better called cosmology, which proceeds rather by way of description of the visible universe than of any analysis either of the principles underlying it or of our knowledge of them. It is a philosophy of aspects, of concrete imagination, not unduly concerned with logic or consistency, but trying to catch truth, as it were, on the wing and give it a round and

tangible form. Mr. Joad's "Theory of Vitalism" is of this type, and a not too critical reader will find in his new book a number of interesting if not always highly original ideas.

The justification of the generalized beginning there, of course, is that it delimits the sphere of the book. If the reviewer had begun concretely by saying that Mr. Joad says thus and so, the critical reader would at once say, "All very well, but from what point and to what point is he working?"

To sum the matter up, the general rule should be to begin a book review by a concrete description of what the book is about with these exceptions: when something striking or illuminating can be said, when some general idea or significant fact brought out intentionally or otherwise through the book is more important than the form or actual matter of the book.



## CHAPTER III

### HOW AND WHY BOOKS ARE PUBLISHED

A YOUNG woman wishes to review books and visits a literary editor. When asked what subjects she is interested in—and knows most about—she often answers “Almost anything.” Sometimes she says she has majored in journalism—which means that she has studied the art of writing when she ought to have been learning something about which to write. She is invited to inspect the books on hand. She is rather staggered, perhaps, by seeing over three hundred books all together—such a sight is unusual outside a library or a bookshop. She looks at them in a puzzled way, and remarks, doubtfully, “Do the publishers send you these?” Sometimes the question shows an even vaguer idea of what it is all about. I have even been asked if the paper bought them, or if the authors sent them.

More than once this young lady—and though she is composite she is not hypothetical—or a relative of hers has written a book, usually of verse, and I am asked how she can get it published. Often I am told that a publisher has offered to take it—is he reliable? “What sort of

an offer did he make?" I asked. "He wanted \$500," the lady replies.

All of which indicates that most people do not know a thing about how books are published. It is disheartening to find people so ignorant, and I should unhesitatingly say that it indicates, even more tragically than the famous army intelligence tests, that our nation is composed of incapables, did I not reflect that I am just as ignorant myself about the inside of baseball, the function of the Electoral College, and a number of other important matters. And as there is nothing very complicated about the publishing of books—aside from making them pay their way, which is a high mystery but none of our concern—this ignorance I have spoken of can be dispelled in a quite short chapter.

When the famed Julia Moore, "The Sweet Singer of Michigan," first published her poems—they are so bad that they have been reprinted more than once—she remarked in her preface that her poems "are all composed by the author." That is a clear and simple statement of the genesis of the majority of books. They are written by the author. Indeed the impatient reader might remark that the statement is less a truth than a pleonasm—but he would be wrong there because some books are not written by the author. When a prominent public man writes his autobiography or his views on the state of the world, the title page often carries two names—his own and that



of a fairly well known newspaper man or magazine writer as collaborator. That means, usually, that the business man supplied the facts or the ideas and that the newspaper man wrote the book. Sometimes no name of a collaborator appears, but the book was nevertheless written by another—technically known as a “ghost.” When a prominent movie actress writes a book it is usually the work of a ghost. A publisher came to see me once and suggested that I make some money on the side by writing biographies or autobiographies for local business men—which he would publish at their expense. Whether my name or theirs appeared on the title page he left to me. But as a general thing Julia Moore was right. The author is the person who composes the book.

And the publisher ought, therefore, to be the person who publishes the book. But most people do not know the difference between a publisher and a printer. If you, gentle reader, have, like Julia Moore, composed poems, or if you have written an account of the pioneering struggles of your grandparents, you may bring your manuscript to a printer and pay him for making a book out of it, but you have not thereby achieved the publication of your book. For before it can be said to be published in any real sense of the word, you must have sent out review copies and also supplied enough bookstores so that when people read reviews of the book they will be able,

if the spirit so moves them, to go to a bookstore and either buy it or order it—and they cannot order it unless the bookseller knows where he can place his order. A regular publisher does not necessarily print his own books, but may have them printed for him (of course some publishers do have their own printing plants). He does not fulfill his function as a publisher until his salesman has sold the book to the bookstores, his manufacturing department delivered it, his advertising department announced it, and his editorial department distributed review copies. Then he collects what the bookseller owes him, pays his printing bills, and pays you royalty on the copies he has sold.

When, therefore, a so-called publisher reads some verses of yours in a magazine and writes you that he would like to see all your work, when you send him that work—it may be verse or a collection of essays or fiction—and when he writes you that your work appeals to him and that he would be glad to publish it if you care to coöperate with him to the tune of \$500 or so, you may know that you are being “stung.” Your “publisher” is going to make his profit out of what you pay him. He will send out a few review copies, it is true, but he will not get your books into the bookstores and they will not sell. There are in the United States about three or four firms doing this sort of thing on a large scale. One of them specializes in verse and sends



out—or was sending out when this was written—an average of three or four volumes of verse a week, which is more than the most literate nation could produce of good poetry a week.

When, on the other hand, a manuscript is sent to a regular publisher he sends it to a reader who reports on its merit. If it is poor or if it is not the sort of book which the house cares to handle, it is returned—express collect, I believe, as a rule. If it is obviously something good, and fits in with the policy of the house, it is accepted. If it is a border-line case the opinion of the first reader is reënforced by sending it to other readers. A book may go to six readers before a decision is reached.

If the book is accepted the publisher sends the author a contract. Contracts differ in detail, but generally speaking they cover the following ground: The author assures the publisher that the manuscript is his original work. The publisher agrees to print and bind the work, to send out review copies, to pay the author a royalty on every copy sold—and ten per cent is the usual minimum royalty, rising to fifteen when the number of copies sold exceeds ten or twelve thousand, whatever figures may be agreed upon—to secure the copyright, and so forth. If the work is fiction the contract may cover the details of serialization or the selling of moving picture rights. It may cover the possibilities of sale in other countries and provision is made for the

termination of the contract or the disposal at remainder prices of copies of the book that may remain unsold after a term of years.

There is almost always a clause—and I have heard beginning authors object to it—that in consideration of the publication of the book the author shall give to the publisher an option on his next two books. This is a fair clause because in any publishing venture all the financial investment and risk is taken by the publisher. Especially is this true if the book is a first one. The fact of its publication alone, quite apart from other publicity work, is an advertisement of the author's name. Possibly the issue of the first book does not pay the publisher his expenses but sufficiently advertises the author so that his next book has a much better chance of making money. Consequently the publisher who has created this state of affairs has a right to cash in on it.

The reader or the aspiring author who reads the advertisements of the publishers in the literary magazines or in the organ of the book trade, *The Publisher's Weekly*, will soon learn the general policy of each house. He will not write a sensational sex story and send it to Messrs. Houghton Mifflin nor will he feel injured if Mr. Liveright rejects a perfectly good doctoral thesis on colloidal chemistry. If any publisher accepts a first book of verse its author ought to feel profoundly grateful, for the publishing of poetry practically



never makes money for the publisher and usually means a loss.

If that is so, the sharp-witted reader will ask, why do so many books get published that are obviously not good selling propositions? That, dear reader, is because a publisher has to do two things if he is to build up a permanent business. He not only has to publish a certain number of books that will make money for him in the season of their publication, but he has to build up a "list" that will give him a good name and that will attract potential authors.

And practically every publisher, too, is in the game not only to make money but because it is a game. If times are bad, he will, of course, not publish work on which he is likely to lose money. But if he is prosperous and finds a book that makes a personal appeal to him, that causes him to say, "This book ought to be published," he will often take it on even if he knows that he will not make a penny out of it. For after all, the "economic man" is a myth and there are other motives, even in business, than the financial one.

However, we should remember that publishing must first of all be a business, and the young author who complains that his publisher has not advertised his book sufficiently, is usually in the wrong. Indeed, if the public does not begin to take to a book in the first place advertising it is a waste of money.

The young author is equally wrong-headed

when he complains that the retail bookseller is not stocking his book. In America books are bought by the bookseller outright. He does not, as a rule, buy on a consignment basis—that is to say, the basis of getting a hundred books, selling what you can and sending the rest back. He takes a chance when he orders a hundred copies of a book. If he only sells fifty and has to offer the rest during his annual sale of worn stock he has lost money. His discount at best—when he orders largely—is only about forty per cent, it averages possibly thirty-three and a third. On “pick-up” orders of one or two copies it may run less than that. For many reasons there is overproduction in certain kinds of books at the present time. A publisher with almost fixed overhead charges is tempted to accept too many popular novels—always hoping that one or two will prove best-sellers and recoup him for his losses on others. Or else he has his manufacturing end down to such a fine point that he can break even if he only sells two thousand copies of a cheap novel. So he goes ahead. The result is that if the bookseller in even the largest cities bought five copies of every novel offered him by the five biggest houses in America he would be overstocked and would probably fail. If he bought one copy of every book of verse published by the legitimate and the author-pay-as-you-enter houses he would be subject to incarceration as a lunatic.



When we consider that the bookseller has to keep in stock a fair representation of the older books—there is still some demand for Shakespeare and Dante—a large number of the earlier books of still living and productive writers, and that in addition to those things there are at the present time approximately 8,000 new works (not counting the very technical ones) published each year, we can readily see that the bookseller has a problem on his hands. And we must remember, too, that books are more perishable than butter. The novel that we all acclaimed yesteryear is by now not merely a shop-worn item that must be marked down. It is something that cannot even be given away. There is a lot of talk among booksellers and publishers about better machinery for distribution. There have been bookselling clubs, one of them with a sensational price-cutting feature. But in my opinion none of these schemes will get very far until people begin to want books more than they do. And so, although it is only a part, propaganda for reading is an important and quite legitimate part of the critic's duty.

## CHAPTER IV

### CRITICISM AND REVIEWING

THE difference between criticizing a book and reviewing it may be stated very simply. If you read a book and write a summary of its contents, telling the ground it covers, possibly noting the style, you have written a review of the book. You have, that is, informed the possible reader as to what is in the book. You have done a job of reporting. And like the reporter you have kept yourself out of the story. If, on the other hand, you talk about the book in terms of your own point of view, if you say whether you think the book is a good one or a bad one, giving your reasons for so stating, you are writing criticism.

There are, of course, many schools of criticism—in the sense of theories as to the function of the critic—but before discussing them we must make an important distinction regarding books themselves.

Most people think of a book as a thing in itself. They tell their younger friends that they must not bury themselves in books “for life is more important than books.” They refer to people



who prefer books to jazz as "bookworms." But there is no such thing as a "book" in and for itself. The word "book" comes from the same Indo-European root as the word "box," and this accident of heredity is suggestive. A book is no more than a box—as we may readily see by examining a specimen of each. The box has a cover and so has the book, and the box has contents and so has the book—and then again both may be empty. If you knew an African explorer who kept a lot of boxes for packing his trophies, you would never think of saying that Mr. Smith is a very boxish man. And by the same token you should never refer to a person who is fond of reading as a bookish man. If he reads more than you do the chances are that he knows more about life than you do.

For a book is simply a convenient receptacle for facts, ideas, and emotions gathered by members of our race during their progress through life. The Hebrews took the symbols that mean these experiences and they did them up in rolls. We prefer to lay those symbols on flat sheets and put them up in the boxes which we call books. Some day we may decide to dispense with the symbols and talk the experiences directly on to prepared surfaces for reproduction through a phonograph, and then I suppose the unfortunate high-brow will be called by his low-brow friends a very vulcanized man—I believe that term is in use to-day though with a different meaning.

## TWO KINDS OF BOOKS

The point of which is that, except for those finely printed books by Bruce Rogers and Daniel B. Updyke, we may as well, in this chapter at least, stop talking about books and talk about what is inside of them.

There may be one of two things inside a book. In the first place there may be information: scientific books, books dealing with public affairs, and to a certain extent books of biography, are informative. They are part of the apparatus of everyday life. Even the most hard-boiled and illiterate business man has his books of reference and his textbooks of procedure. The days when a trade could be learned by practical apprenticeship are over—every profession and business now has its textbooks. And over against these we have books in which are stored the emotional experiences and the imaginative adventures and discoveries of the race and of gifted individuals. These are works of art and there is nothing in the practical world that takes their place or that even corresponds to them. To be sure, in spite of all we have heard about art for art's sake they have affected life—and profoundly. The simplest lover to-day is unconsciously plagiarizing from hundreds of poets and novelists. Of course this division is not a complete "dichotomy." A really interesting biography, for instance, is factual and informative, but it is also re-creative



of a complete person, and we take æsthetic as well as intellectual delight in reading it.

It is obvious that in dealing with two such different categories as informative books and æsthetic books we shall use quite different methods of reviewing or criticizing. You could not "review" a book of poems. Because if you merely wrote a review of a sonnet by Shakespeare and told the facts of the case: that in this sonnet Mr. Shakespeare makes the following statements; you would be telling nothing, for in a sonnet the statements merely exist for the sake of the emotions or the intuition which they express. The only thing worth telling about a sonnet would be the æsthetic impression you received from it—whether it was a good or bad sonnet. And that would be criticism.

On the other hand, a book of information may be reviewed—as when you say, "This book covers the following ground . . ." or it may be criticized. And the job of criticism is a simple one. Is the information accurate? Is the book authoritative? Up to date? Is it complete? And so on. The only qualifications of the critic are that he know the subject and be able to express himself clearly.

### SOME TYPICAL FAILINGS

One common mistake of the unpracticed reviewer is to review not the book but the table of

contents. I once read a review of a book dealing with educational psychology. It ran something as follows:

This textbook of educational psychology by Dr. A. and Prof. B. covers the ground of infant psychology in part one and adolescent psychology in part two. The authors devote a great deal of attention to the influence of the home on the mind of the child and one very interesting chapter deals with the differences in early years between boys and girls in regard to the rapidity of the learning process—

And so it went. I remarked to the reviewer that she might at least have told us whether the authors were behaviorists or introspectionists, and she replied that she had not thought that necessary because all psychologists were behaviorists nowadays—a thought which came to me, I must admit, as a distinct novelty.

Another very prevalent error is to make the review turn wholly upon the experiences that are actually recorded in the book as if they had been created by fiat within the covers of the book—and had not first been part of an environment. Here for example is a review once turned in to me of "The Diary of Lady Anne Clifford," with an introductory note by V. Sackville-West:

Fascinating little bits from the diary of an English lady of the seventeenth century.



The diary begins with the death of Queen Elizabeth (when Lady Anne was about fourteen years of age), and continues on at intervals until the year 1619. We see Lady Anne's life as a child, under the rather severe influence of her mother, yet lightened at times by the bright fabulous colors of her adventurous father—a sea-dog of Queen Elizabeth. The book continues on with Lady Anne's married life (telling especially about her child) and stressing the trouble for Lady Anne caused by her father's will.

The diary will be valuable for research work, depicting as it does seventeenth century England—especially the court life.

V. Sackville-West has added an introductory note which enhances the fascination of the diary and completes the picture.

In form that is a review rather than criticism but in reality it is not even a review. Overlooking the tendency of the diary to "continue on" let us ask what there is in that writing to show that the reviewer knows anything about the author of the diary or of the age in which she lived. The reviewer was not asked to economize in space and so she had a clear field. She tells us nothing about Lady Anne or her family—except that her father was a sailor. She tells us nothing about the social background of the diarist. Does the diary throw any light on contem-

porary events?—we are told nothing except that it will be of interest to research workers. Was there any interesting story behind that troublesome will? We are not told.

Regarding the publication of the diary we are told nothing. Is this the first time it has ever been published? Where was it found? Where is the original, if by chance any scholar may wish to refer to it? Nobody seems to know—as far as the reviewer is concerned. Has it been edited for modern readers or may it be read in this published form in its original spelling? About the only thing you can say in favor of this review is that if the reviewer ever got another Elizabethan lady's diary to handle she could use that same copy with just the change of proper names and the profession of the father.

Apart from the poor writing of that review we may say that it errs by defect. More often a new reviewer errs by excess. I give out a rather ordinary book of critical essays for review. All the reviewer need do is to tell what authors are treated and from what point of view. But instead she begins as follows:

American criticism was for long a phrase politely if superciliously applied to such faint echoes as sounded on this side of the Atlantic from those sacred oracles, the English reviewers. But with the advent on the literary horizon of a man vulgarly known as



the author of "The Raven" and certain other verses in a like tenor, as well as a few tales of a dank variety of weirdness, criticism as a conscious and authentic branch of letters officially came to life in America. His deprecators have called Poe the least American of all our writers, a conclusion which might be construed as an inverted piece of praise; but they have failed to take account of the fact that he is the founder of American criticism.

Now, since the days of its beginnings, the critic's audience has been augmented to include not merely various coteries of professional literati, and the few devotees alike possessed of an educational and the thinking faculty, but to include as well a group numerically larger and of more potential importance than these. For convenience, that group is personified by the phrase-makers by means of the name, "the general reader." Its members are partially educated adults who, with something of the spirit of American efficiency, have seized on the mantle of learning with the hope of presentably clothing an intellectual *déshabille* but very recently discovered. The critic, then, writes also for these people whose tastes he is to guide to a considerable degree, if not actually form.

All excessive and all unnecessary! Nothing said in this introduction is followed up. There would be an excuse for that introduction if the writer intended to show that the critic with whom she is dealing carries on or modifies or negates the canons of criticism of Poe, or, in view of her second paragraph, if the audience in Poe's day and the audience to-day make a discernible difference to the sort of criticism Poe wrote and the criticism in the book under review. But she does not. After those two paragraphs Poe is forgotten and we get a bare summary of what the author under review says—really a statement of his conclusions without any regard to the evidence through which he reached those conclusions.

A third common mistake in book reviewing is to say what comes into one's mind in the order in which it happens to come. Here is a short review of a recent book, "The Stump Farm" by Hilda Rose: I give the review as it was written. In one or two places the English might be improved but that is not the main point at the moment:

Here is a vivid portrayal of the struggles made by a woman against overwhelming odds on an arid stump farm. The battle of an unconquerable will against hardships, drought, and primitive resources in the Northwest is starkly told.



The courageous woman, author of the book and its unconscious heroine, is blessed with insight and a great sympathy that seems broadened by her contact with rough labor. It is the story of her pioneer life with an aged husband and her small son. After many years of fruitless struggling on the stump farm she takes her small family and together they make a brave migration to a homestead on the Canadian frontier where things look more cheerful.

The book is a collection of letters that Hilda Rose has written to her friends and which were published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and later consolidated and put into book form. This unassuming book is well written with the vitality of truth. It is pregnant with adventure and hope, fascinating because it is the story of a living, breathing individual.

Note the succession of the points there. We are first told that this is the story of a woman's struggle on a stump farm, and that it is starkly done. We are then told that the author has insight and a great sympathy. Next we go back to the substance of the book and are told a few more details of the struggle—she had a husband and a child and after a time they migrated. Then we are told that the book is in the form of letters, first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Then we return once more to the subject of the book and the manner of its writing. Now let the reader glance back at the review and read it again but beginning with the last paragraph and then taking the second, and then the first—it will sound just as logical if read in that order. Which means, of course that it was written in no order at all.

I suggested to the reviewer that she rewrite the review in accordance with the following plan:

1. What is the material of this book—letters of a woman who worked a stump farm.

2. What sort of things do they deal with—her tragic struggle on the farm, her marriage, her husband, her child, the migration.

3. What sort of woman do they reveal—a very heroic woman who can be clear-sighted enough about her own struggles to write of them in this manner.

The fact that the letters were first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* might be included in the first section or it might be given, with the collaborator's name, as a sort of finishing note in a final paragraph.

But every review should be planned. Some people plan unconsciously: they have a sense of form, that works itself out as they write. But unless you are one of those people you ought always to plan your review in advance, for if you jump from one point to another and back again you cannot carry on an argument, if you are



writing argumentatively, and you certainly cannot guide your reader's mind to the best advantage—he will advance in a series of jerks and end at the point from which he started.

### REVIEWING THE BOOK AND REVIEWING THE IDEA

An important point in reviewing books of information or opinion is the distinction between the idea and the expression of the idea—the subject and the book. Suppose, for instance, that you have been given George Bernard Shaw's "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism" to review. You may handle it from two points of view or you may choose to take only one of them—but you must never confuse them. You may handle it, for instance, on the ground of the value of the idea of Socialism, in which case your review will be an answer to the question: "Must we accept Socialism?" Or you may leave that question up to the reader and review the book simply on its merits as an exposition of Socialism, in which case your review will be an answer to the question: "Has Mr. Shaw fairly represented the doctrine of Socialism?"

It so happened that the first review of this book to come to my attention did neither of these two things consistently but was written from the one point of view that every critic should avoid—the *ex cathedra* position in which

the reviewer makes such categorical statements as "This is true" or "This is false" without backing them up with argument. I quote two sentences:

But his alternative, Socialism, with state ownership and equal income is impracticable and undesirable. He is plausible but not sound.

Please remember that I am not denying that that may be the truth. In fact I think that in telling us that Socialism means equal incomes Mr. Shaw is taking for his own uses a word—"Socialism"—and giving it an almost illegitimate meaning. However, we do not read reviews to hear the law laid down but to be convinced.

The critic of this book, therefore, must not only have a sufficient background to know the differences between the various types of Socialism, but if he elects to review Shaw's ideas, he must first tell us what those ideas are, then he must tell us whether Mr. Shaw's alignment of them, one with another, is consistent—whether, for instance, Mr. Shaw's idea that we should all have equal incomes is consistent with his idea that Socialism must come gradually and for a long time exist along with private enterprise—and then he must assess the value of those ideas in terms of the general principles of economics



and with regard to the wider question of social psychology.

On the other hand, if he does not wish to enter upon those questions—and they are so controversial, even so lacking in those agreements upon definition of terms without which discussion is always futile, that a reviewer may well prefer to leave their advocacy or rejection to his reader—he may simply criticize the book. That is to say, he may, in effect, address his reader thus:

You and I, gentle reader, may believe in or disbelieve in Socialism, but in any event we wish to know what it is. Mr. Shaw is a Fabian Socialist, and therefore we do not find in this book any description of the Marxian kind, but rather a description and critique of capitalism which is fair—or which is unfair, if you happen to think that—followed by a description of the organization of society which Mr. Shaw thinks is necessary to save it from reversion to tyranny or from revolution.

In writing for a general newspaper one would be more likely to use that form of review; in preparing a paper for a society or club interested in social reform or in economics, one would, while not slighting the question of how representative Mr. Shaw is of Socialist doctrine in

general, criticize the doctrine as well as his representation of it. In the criticism of the book, your data would be those of the book; in the criticism of the ideas you would not be confined to Mr. Shaw's treatment—you could use counter-arguments from economic conditions in America, for example.

### A NOTE ON COMPARISON

To some people criticism is almost synonymous with comparison. A lawyer once asked me if I had read all of Scott's novels. I replied that I had not. He then said: "But I thought that you had to know all the great novels of the past in order to compare the books of to-day to them." Of course a critic should be as widely read as he can become without neglecting more important things. But even if I had read every word of Scott I should rarely compare a present-day novel to any of his. The thing to compare a novel to is the thing that its author is comparing it to—life as he sees it. Or you may compare the technique of this author to the technique of that author to point out interesting similarities or differences, or how the technique of one man enables him to catch in his net some subtlety that another man loses through not having a technique adapted to the purpose.

Direct comparison is the tool, however, of the critic of ideas and of works of knowledge rather



than of the æsthetic critic. Occasionally it is a very good thing to compare two books in detail. Thus, a few months ago, Professor William Bennett Munro published a series of lectures, "The Invisible Government," in which was implicit a critique of our American system of government and of democracy in general. Soon after, Professor John Dewey published another series of lectures in which under the title, "The Public and Its Problems," he dealt, but in a very different manner, with some of the same problems. The parallel was not only interesting, but to call attention to it was important, for the reader of either book would be likely to have his political opinions and perhaps his political actions changed by what he read. Both authors agreed in accepting certain facts about our public life—both were at one in combating certain optimistic illusions of the man in the street, such as the idea that at the present time we are living in a country governed for all the people by all the people. But the interpretations of these facts given by the two scholars were vastly different. And so when, having already reviewed the first named of the two books some weeks before, I came to review Professor Dewey's book, I began by a direct comparison, as follows:

Some weeks ago I reviewed on this page Prof. William Bennett Munro's "The Invisible Government," the leading theses of

which book were that democracy in the sense that the people by their own volition governed themselves was a myth, that the idea that the public, as a public, could govern itself was also a myth; that our actual policies were not the reflection of the will of the voters, but of geographic and economic conditions, that whereas we had theoretically a government of the nation and likewise a number of state governments, in practice it was the section that worked as a unit—the geographically unified section—and not the state, in those matters which were not national in scope. Mr. Munro also pointed to the fact that the dead hand, rather than the living mind, dictated much of our political thinking. He confined himself to the exposition of this state of affairs, and his only practical suggestion for governmental reform was the recognition of the section as a political unit which ought to have political—in the sense of governmental—representation.

In Professor Dewey's "The Public and Its Problems" we have a consideration of these matters that in part runs parallel to Professor Munro's exposition, but goes further than Professor Munro in that it discusses the possibilities of overcoming the conditions which he describes. Where the one book is descriptive and diagnostic, the



other is prognostic and therapeutic. At the present juncture of affairs the public is undoubtedly in eclipse, and whereas one feels after reading the first mentioned of these books that possibly that is the best place for it, the second book suggests that the eclipse need not be a permanent one.

As Professor Dewey has the reputation of writing in a rather tough style, it should be said at the outset that this book is very clearly written. In its pages he has applied the instrumental philosophy to the problems of the public and the state, and it is surprising to see what a clean sweep he is able to make of a great deal of rubbish which has hitherto impeded constructive thinking in these matters. The theory, for instance, of which the idealists have made much, that the state has superindividual validity because it is an expression of the absolute, and from which they draw practical conclusions such as we see put over in Italy to-day. Mr. Dewey rather unkindly suggests that if the state is all that the idealists say it is, it is strange that such little things as mountain barriers have cut it up into mutually exclusive manifestations. . . .

That is only the beginning of what was a long review, but it will illustrate the point just made. Note also that I do not merely tell—later in the

review—Professor Dewey's conclusions, but that I state, to begin with, the position from which he reaches those conclusions—the philosophy of instrumentalism—and that I take pains to offset an idea which I suspect will come into the mind of many readers the moment they see the name of the author of the book—the idea that it will be hard reading because Professor Dewey has a difficult style. That idea is true only in part, and it does not apply to the book under discussion. But as it might prejudice some readers against that book it is well to get it out of the way to begin with.



## CHAPTER V

### A NOTE ON BIOGRAPHY

IN one field of letters, a most intensively cultivated one of late, the critic has to think both in terms of fact and in terms of art. Biography is in a sense novel writing in the medium of factual material. Perhaps only in intention is that true of the older type of biography—though we must remember that the novel of an older day, as well as the biography, was likely to be in three volumes. In fact it is true of the biography to-day, which indeed shades off into fiction, as we see in the works of E. Barrington.

But no matter how serious or even "definitive" the modern biography may be, its author faces the problem of artistic presentation which involves the omission of insignificant detail and even of material which cannot be called detail, if it happens not to be significant—while on the other hand things that are apparently trivial must often be recorded for their value as indicators of character. And as long as it is the fashion to speak of a new school of biographical writing it may not be amiss to remind the reader that one of its best known representatives con-

fesses that he learned the technique from Plutarch.

This kind of biographical writing is so much in the fashion that the neophyte in criticism should be warned against indiscriminate comment upon it. For there are pitfalls—if not for the author at least for the appraiser of his work.

Apart from early instances and forecasts of it, the new method is usually associated with the name of Lytton Strachey. But for some years before Strachey was to write his "Eminent Victorians," Gamaliel Bradford had been writing what he called "psychographs" or character portraits, which aimed to be dramatic, to use facts in such a way that each fact should do its full share of interpreting the character.

And after the war had made us conscious of ourselves as a nation, as the inheritors of traditions, of a culture, and also of a mass of rather porous mythology, younger men than Gamaliel Bradford followed him into the field of national biography on a larger scale. The consequence is that during the last ten years we have had an extraordinary overhauling of our founding fathers and their immediate successors. And with Paxton Hibben's "Henry Ward Beecher" and Gamaliel Bradford's "D. L. Moody"—to say nothing of R. M. Werner's "Brigham Young"—it looks as though our spiritual leaders were in for an overhauling too.

Of course one reaction to all this is the old



cry of "muckraker"—a cry which no intelligent critic ought to raise. For in practically every instance it is unjustified. Take, for example, Rupert Hughes' "George Washington" planned for one volume, enlarged and again enlarged, until at this writing two volumes have been published, with, I believe, two more to come. Because we had made a myth of George Washington we were surprised to find, through Mr. Hughes' pages, that he was a hard-boiled man. He had to be to survive along with the other hard-boiled men among whom he lived. We were surprised to find that having been assigned—by us—the title of Father of His Country, he had had no prevision of the Eighteenth Amendment, and had imbibed certain quantities of liquor and had even given liquor to others. And so, overlooking the fact that Mr. Hughes gave documentary evidence for every fact he told us, and that his evidence for his estimate of Washington's personal character was Washington's own revelation of it in his diaries—recently printed and so made available to any one who wishes to check up on Mr. Hughes—we, or some among the older of us, cried "muckraker." Of course the cry was nonsense, and any one who wishes to see how little Mr. Hughes is answerable to the charge of iconoclasm has only to read the first two chapters of his second volume.

It is a good exercise in criticism to contrast this work, for spirit and for use of factual ma-

terial, with Woodward's "George Washington: The Man and the Image," which was published at about the same time. Mr. Hughes' work may perhaps be called a biography of the new school since it involves a fearless and clear-headed approach to source material and because it exhibits a modern, scientific grasp of motivation. But it is really in the classic tradition of good historical and biographical writing. Mr. Woodward, on the other hand, is "smart" and writes from the point of view of a twentieth-century critic of Washington. And, as his treatment of the character and achievements of the ill-fated General Braddock shows when contrasted with Mr. Hughes' treatment, he has been more interested in amusing his readers than he has been in original research.

To be sure he has done some research work, but he has not done anything like the original research work that Mr. Hughes has done. And here is a point which the critic ought always to make in dealing with biography: Is the work one of original research or is it merely one of interpretation? He should next ask whether the work is, as far as its interpretation goes, one of historical interpretation—that is to say, does it give us, as Mr. Hughes does, a picture of the character of the man as determined by his times and as determining in turn the happenings of his day—or is it one of interpretation in the light of



twentieth-century standards, as Mr. Woodward's book is to a large extent.

We may see these contrasts in other recent works of biography. For instance the earlier biographies of Poe scolded him for his lack of moral stamina. Hervey Allen's "Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe" does not scold him at all, but shows him as determined, in his fortunes and in his genius, by the social forces of his day. On the other hand, Joseph Wood Krutch's "Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius" tries to explain the salient features of his life by a very up-to-date application of analytical psychology.

Mr. Allen and Mr. Krutch both make original contributions to our understanding of Poe. But American critics have not given those two books together as much enthusiastic comment as they gave to a biographical work published a few years ago in an English translation: Andre Maurois' "Ariel: The Life of Shelley," which, as I remember, was hailed with every superlative. That praise was perhaps justified if we looked upon the book as a piece of artistic presentation—as a novel. But surely as an interpretation of Shelley it was far from adequate. Indeed, a fellow-countryman of Andre Maurois, a professor of French literature in an American university, told me that the only source, outside the works of Shelley that M. Maurois used in the preparation of his book was Dowden's "Life." The same

method, though with a larger base of source material, is seen in M. Maurois' "Disraeli." It looks like a life of the British statesman but it is really only a portrait of him and gives no warning to the uninformed reader when this or that part of Disraeli's life is omitted.

Obviously there is a great difference in performance, and even in intention, in such an impressionistic sketch as we have in "Ariel" and the sort of biography that Professor Walter Edwin Peck has given us in "Shelley: His Life and Times." One is the work of a clever worker in pastiche, the other that of a painstaking scholar—whose work will perhaps become the plunder of future biographical impressionists. The critic of biography therefore runs a good chance of misguiding his readers if he does not make the distinctions I have outlined: between works of original research, that are documented and of value to the reader who is seriously studying their subject; and works which are primarily to entertain; between works which treat their subject historically and those which treat their subject from a critical point of view—and here, again, the critical point of view may be a philosophic one or a topical one.



## CHAPTER VI

### ÆSTHETIC CRITICISM—ART AND MORALS

CRITICISM of books of knowledge or of opinion, it will be seen, is not a matter over which one can dispute. The aim of such books is to state the truth—and all the critic has to do is to ask whether this or that is the truth and whether it is properly stated. But usually, when we use the word criticism and talk about theories of criticism and quarrel as violently as we do on the subject, we are in an altogether different realm from the realm of facts—and it is a realm, apparently, in which we have difficulty in finding our way around.

When I read, as I did recently in a book on the Orient, that the foreign trade of China had increased 200 per cent within the last twenty years I was surprised but I was not mystified: there was a fact and it threw a good deal of light on recent events in China. But suppose we run through the work of Keats. We find an observation regarding nightingales:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal  
Bird,

No hungry generations tread thee down.

We find a historical and geographic reference:

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

And here is a philosophic generalization:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

And all three of these extracts exhibit what even the most kindly critic can only call a reckless disregard of facts. The nightingale is not exempt from the struggle for existence and from mortality; the soldiers of Cortez did not see the Pacific from a mountain top in Darien; and truth and beauty cannot be the same thing—if only because Ogden and Richards in their book, "The Meaning of Meaning," give sixteen different senses in which the word beauty is used, while as regards truth, the Platonists, the Pragmatists and Pontius Pilate have all to be reckoned with before we can begin to get clear what it is. Indeed there are times when one can sympathize with an elderly lawyer of my acquaintance who tells me that he never reads novels because they deal with things that didn't really happen,



whereas everything in the *National Geographic Magazine*, which he does read, is not only interesting but presumably true.

Possibly the most widespread solution of this seeming puzzle is that a work of art is not intended to be a true statement of facts but is a fable intended to teach a moral. The fox never really mistook a reflection of grapes in water for the real grapes, but let us pretend that he did, and as a reward for the effort of imagination involved we shall learn to avoid—through being able to recognize it—that humiliating situation in which we have to decry that which we have been unable to attain. Unfortunately this simple explanation of the rôle of art will not hold water, but we can see its inadequacy most clearly after we have tried to find out what art really does and why it seems to have a license to tell us so many lies—inventing mythical characters, creating strange beasts, and putting sophisticated sentiments into the mouths of innocent flowers—even to the extent of accusing them of blushing, and blushing, at that, when they have done nothing to be ashamed of and when there is nobody looking in any event:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen . . .

I do not defend art from the charge of lying. I shall merely point out that Life is an even bigger

ger liar. Only let us be polite and call it not lying but fiction. Our life to-day is largely made possible by science. If it were not for science a lot of us who are nearing forty or fifty would have been dead of infectious diseases long ago. A lot more of us would never have been born because our country would not have been able to support enough people to provide us with forbears. And yet this whole advance of science, through which our environment has been made safe for more and more democracy, is based on fictions. Science is based on a series of assumptions which are inadequate for the description of the full reality of things. Only those aspects of things which are susceptible of mathematical measurement are handled by science. By the scientist, light is analyzed in terms of vibrations. Substances are analyzed in terms of their atomic or ionic constitutions. Animals are assumed to be machines—and so are persons. Even the experience of beauty, in so far as it is a matter of scientific discourse, is analyzed into physiological reactions. When you ask the scientist about the *value* of any of these elements of experience, whether they are "good" or "bad," he refers you to the philosopher.

It is the same in our practical life. We have to make our way in a very complex and often inhospitable or even hostile environment. We do not have time to recognize every object we see, and so we invent concepts and say "dog"



indiscriminately for this, that and the other quadruped which barks at one end and wags at the other. If we happen to be a dog fancier we subdivide that concept into others: St. Bernard, Pomeranian, and so on. But every individual dog has more to him than is contained in the bare concept—that is to say the concept is inadequate to the full truth about any one dog.

We are just as economical in our mental dealings with our fellow beings. We speak of a certain man as the grocer—because we use him in that capacity and we are not concerned with him as he is in his full reality. The man whom we call the grocer may be called a Republican by the precinct captain, a Christian by his pastor—if he have one—and a good provider by his wife. All of these being convenient fictions—abstractions from a full reality that only omniscience could know in all its fullness.

And as a matter of fact, the artist comes nearer telling the truth about things than the scientist, the technologist, or the practical man. For while most of us analyze a thing the moment we see it, into what we can use or cannot use, or else classify it in terms of similar things, the artist retains the child's faculty of looking at a thing just as it is in itself. In regard to some things we all retain this childlike faculty. We all enjoy looking at a fire, for example. It is a spectacle. Now anything that we enjoy looking at or listening to for its own sake is experienced

æsthetically. That is the real meaning of the word æsthetic, and it has, necessarily, nothing to do with art. When we watch a fire and say that it is a spectacular fire—meaning that it is worth looking at—we have æsthetic experience. But if we recognize that it is our own house which is burning down, that is another matter. We are then unable to view the spectacle æsthetically—we look at it from a practical point of view and hope to goodness that those firemen will put it out soon. Or else we wonder whether we have paid our last insurance premium. If the fire burns merrily we only think of it as disastrous. If a fellow-gazer told us that the two terms—spectacular and disastrous—were synonymous we should feel quite unsympathetic to the idea. And they are not—but the same phenomenon may call each of them to mind and with equal distinctness.

So of all life; when we regard it with interest and enjoyment as a spectacle, we are enjoying æsthetic experience. But life presses upon us. As soon as childhood has passed, and, in many ways, sooner, we find that we cannot be a mere spectator at the play—we must participate. Then we talk about life in terms of practical, scientific, and moral judgments.

But æsthetic experience is there all the time, for those who can enjoy it, and some people, as a result of their enjoyment, wish to make a record of what moves them. These men are artists,



and whether they work in words, in sounds, in colors or in the masses which are sculpture, they are doing the same thing—recording, in the medium which will best express it, their vision of life. And their works, read or seen by us, will give us æsthetic experiences roughly equivalent to those that gave impetus to the artists. The sort of art we have depends on the nature of the experiences portrayed. In every experience there are two factors, the outward occasion of the experience and the inner response. The realist sees things just as they appear to eyes and ears attuned to the practical, everyday world. Take for example the primrose. Wordsworth's Peter Bell was a realist, and:

A primrose by the river's brim  
A yellow primrose was to him  
And it was nothing more.

An even more practical person would regard a primrose as a basis for making wine—almost as hopeless an attitude as that of the exceedingly hard-boiled people who regard larks as the basis for lark-pie. Even Shakespeare, who on occasion could do poetic justice to primroses, used them unworthily when he made them the means to point a moral and spoke, in one play, of "the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire" and in another of "the primrose path of dalliance." Now when he wrote those lines he was not seek-

ing, as a poet should, the actual primrose, for its character is misrepresented in such a context. And so he draws from a poet of to-day, Edmund Blunden, a protest—the poem is entitled “An Annotation,” and I quote it from Mr. Blunden’s book, “Retreat” (London: Cobden-Sanderson):

Emblem of early seeking, early finding,  
Frailness whose patience stills the moody  
cries

Of old Time struggling through chaotic  
skies

Where the lashed sleet-gust foams, buffeting  
and blinding,

And then hast been the light in his calm eyes  
May after May, a star so dear and mild  
That love by the evening bell and thee be-  
guiled

Thinks echo charmed to thy still bell replies;  
Pilgrim to whom the weaker sort will turn  
Their pale looks, and thy pale resolve re-  
sponds,

Thy paths are peace, they comfort and not  
burn,

There young Love strolls, old Adage stares  
in ponds.

With what strange wrong was Shakespeare  
mocked when he

So flung thee to the hooves of infamy?

That is not only a beautiful sonnet but it is a most interesting æsthetic document. It shows us



that even in the most subjective of the arts there is a consistency and a hanging together of things, so that even a master may be called out of order when he disobeys that fitness. It shows us, too, that in art, and especially in those types of art which are not realistic, the simplest sort of outer occasion may give rise to the most deeply emotional reactions on the part of the artist. And so the three Keats quotations with which I began this chapter, though taken as facts are false, are nevertheless true as expressions of emotion.

On the other hand, a genuine realist may be so moved by the spectacle of human life in the gross and on the ordinary but often tragic level of living that he gives us long and detailed pictures of what he sees and leaves the pictures to make their own appeal—keeping himself as artist strictly out of the picture.

In the next chapter, and using poetry as illustrative material I shall say more about the psychology of art, and what I shall say will apply, with the necessary modifications, to fiction or drama as well.

## ART AND MORALS

Meanwhile, however, I wish to make one point which is vital for all æsthetic criticism, and I think the foregoing remarks give us a sufficient basis for intelligent consideration of the point. It is this—that art as art cannot be judged by

moral criteria. As I have said above, many people think that art exists only as a sugar coating for the bitter pills of moral instruction. They will tell you that Harold Bell Wright's books or A. S. M. Hutchinson's are "uplifting" while Sherwood Anderson's are "sordid." Now the essence of morality is its generality. Morality is expressed in general rules: Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal; be kind to animals; never trump your partner's ace, and so on. But any work of art is a specific picture, and it is a picture of things as they are revealed to æsthetic experience. And lamentably enough, perhaps, to æsthetic experience morality is simply one aspect of the show. Shakespeare put just as much pains into his delineation of Iago as he did into that of Hamlet or Coriolanus. And we enjoy Iago's villainy, even though in practical life we should suppress Iago if we could. And lest this seem to the tender-minded reader a great pity, I may add that the very people who can most enjoy Iago—and enjoyment here comes through understanding—in the play might be the best fitted to deal properly with him if they met him in real life.

Further, you can never prove anything from one instance. If you could you might say: it is perfectly proper to steal because I have looked into the matter and Boss Croker got away with it. And when a man writes a novel to prove a moral thesis, he is not only trying to prove a



general rule from a single instance, but he is loading his dice—he is inventing something that will make his point rather than recording what he has actually seen.

Lastly, the moral experience of the race is old and varied, and the fact that you and I, dear reader, are healthy and enjoying our freedom is probably due to the fact that we are, in essentials, fairly moral. And surely when we read a poem the point of which is that we should love our mothers and give them flowers on Mother's Day—surely we feel that we knew all that before.

But this does not mean that art has nothing to do with morals. It only means that art is not the proper medium for moral propaganda: the journal of discussion, the pulpit, the school, all contribute toward moral culture. And the home ought to do the most of all—but by example rather than by precept. And all art of a literary character except the nature lyric does, as a matter of fact, deal with moral situations. But in the spirit of the sympathetic reporter rather than that of the moralistic advocate.

### A WORD ABOUT SEX

The above considerations are theoretical. Practically the question of art and morals simmers down to a question of sex. All the books which have been haled into court of late years

—unless they were accused of being seditious in their teachings—have been said to be “suggestive” or “salacious.” The basis of the trouble here is that while hunger is a simple appetite, always appeasable for those who have a few cents in their pockets, sex is a highly complex appetite, interwoven with our physical bodies and with our spiritual selves, and subject, in this complicated society, to all sorts of restrictions and inherited taboos. In many people, too, the psychic conditioning of the sex impulse is twisted and warped. Also, we fear that the appetite, if stimulated in the young, will lead to dangerous consequences.

The censorious-minded, therefore, attack certain books because these books offend their ideas as to what is fitting and proper to discuss and because they may hurt the tender minds of children. To take the latter point first, I am afraid that the only solution as far as children is concerned is to give them such instruction in the home, and treat the whole matter with such frankness that they will be immune to sexual suggestion in pornographic literature. This is the only basic treatment. To palliate the difficulty by keeping suggestive books away from children is impossible. For children precocious in sexual curiosity have been known to thumb over the very Book of Books itself for a few of those physiological passages which are to be found in the Old Testament.



As for the suppression of books intended for older readers—and many of which children would never have the endurance to read through anyway—I do not see that censorship is a necessity. For the frankly pornographic book the ordinary police power suffices for any prosecution that a citizen or public officer may wish to bring.

But the critic will wonder just how he should deal with such books. In the first place he should discriminate. Sex is an important aspect of life, and in any novel dealing with life, it is bound to come in somewhere. It should be honestly faced when it does—neither muffled and apologized for by the novelist nor blushed and sniggered at by the reader. Here is an instance of the structural part that a sex episode may play in a serious novel. In Theodore Dreiser's "The Genius" there is a very painful scene in an obstetrical room. An elderly wife is about to give birth to a child, and dangerous complications arise. Her condition is described in some detail—and there is a very good reason why it should be. Her husband, who has not always been faithful to her, or even decent to her in the everyday relations of life, sees the pain she is undergoing and knows that she is in danger of her life. I, he reflects, am responsible for all of this—and I therefore owe this woman an allegiance which I have not been giving her.

Obviously, if Mr. Dreiser were not allowed

to dwell upon the scene he would not be able to make the point that he does.

On the other hand, in much of the writing of James Branch Cabell and in some of Norman Douglas's work, sex is used in a different way. The authors of these books might claim that as satirists they were entitled to make fun of, to ridicule, the situations in which foolish man finds himself when he follows his sex-urge thinking that it will be a short-cut to happiness. This defense may be a perfectly valid one. On the other hand, we sometimes feel that it is merely a defense—I know that when I read Norman Douglas's "In the Beginning" I felt that although the book was erudite, playful, satirical, there was nevertheless a strand in it of sex for the sake of sex. As a matter of fact the satire was very elementary—a making fun of our conventional distinctions between good and evil, but not done, as it ought to have been, for effectiveness, from a point of view beyond good and evil, but from a point of view that was prior to good and evil. And I was not alone in this opinion, for T. S. Matthews, reviewing the book in *The New Republic* (June 6, 1928) ends his review thus:

The sexual debauches of his characters are dragged into the narrative so gratuitously and so often that they end by attracting our attention for their own sakes, instead of merely contributing to a satirical picture.



The description of Linus' city—indeed the whole end of the book—peters out into a display of perversions. And the scene in which the angry goddess avenges herself on Linus is effective only because it is revolting—a bestially vivid picture of a bestial killing.

Mr. Douglas's growing taste for these delicatessen is a disquieting sign. It might possibly be called a scholarly interest. In college we used to call it "professorial salaciousness."

Of course I assume that no sensible person would be hurt by reading that sort of thing. And unfortunately, the very machinery of censorship which is supposed to protect children from pornography is, as a matter of fact, always invoked against perfectly decent books—as Mr. Dreiser's book was. But at the same time we should not, as some of the younger writers of the Left Wing do, proclaim our freedom from sex taboos by attributing great literary merit to works which exploit sex and exploit it cheaply.

All the terms used in this chapter have strong "emotive" connotations, and I am not unaware that where I have endeavored to appeal to reason I may have been addressing prejudice. The reader who is unconvinced by what I have said, or who wishes a more detailed and fundamental consideration of the matter, I refer to a work,

"Moral Philosophy: The Critical View of Life," by Warner Fite (Lincoln MacVeagh), which in its treatment of this and other aspects of criticism is of fundamental importance—its thesis indeed being that morality, truth and beauty when critically interpreted imply one another. And when we understand this we shall have no difficulty in the relative evaluation of such works as those of Dreiser, Cabell, and Norman Douglas.



## CHAPTER VII

### CRITICIZING POETRY

A GREAT many people tell you that they enjoy novels but never read poetry, so many indeed that I feel nervous over their imagined criticism of the order of these chapters. They will wonder why I did not deal with fiction before going on to the less important (as they will say) and more "high-brow" subject of poetry. We have been discussing, very inadequately, the question of æsthetics, and by taking poetry next we can see more clearly than would otherwise be possible how these æsthetic principles are exhibited in art. And many of the points, which we shall demonstrate easily and in short compass by using poetic examples, will serve us also when it comes to the study of fiction. A number of fallacies regarding æsthetics can also best be shown in connection with poetry.

Indeed I shall begin with one of the fallacies. As I have already tried to show, a work of art is not created with a homiletic purpose. But some of the younger artists, irritated no doubt by the homiletic theory of art, have gone to the other extreme and said that art should have

no content at all, that pictures should be pure form and that poetry should be pure verbal music. One such critic praised a novel of George Moore's on the ground that in form it was a perfect symphony. A young American poet, John McClure, in an article in the well-known and always very decided *American Mercury*, went so far as to say that poetry "as a form of utterance distinct from prose is simply music in words—an attempt to create beauty in rhythm and tone. Its sole distinguishing characteristic is its harmonization of syllables in rhythm. There is no such thing as a poetic 'idea.'"

Your common sense will revolt at such a notion. But as long as common sense also revolts at Einstein and will probably be put down by the intellectual police, let us attack this notion more constitutionally than by mere revolt. In the first place we must admit that poetry must be verbal music—harmonization of syllables and so forth. And we must also admit that there is no such thing as a poetic idea—though this may surprise you. But, when you think of it, an idea is a piece of intellectual furnishing—the idea of a tree for example. But a tree is not poetic. In poetry you seldom have a mere tree—it is always an individualized tree of a definite kind that you can picture in your mind. In other words, not an idea of "tree" but an intuition or apprehension of some individual tree.

When we talk about certain ideas or even



scenes being "poetic," we are using the word in a loose sense. We mean that they suggest possibilities of poetic treatment, if we mean anything. And sometimes we do not mean anything except that they make us feel sentimental.

But if what Mr. McClure said were literally true, we should enjoy poetry in a language we do not understand—which is true only to a very limited extent—and we should enjoy nonsense verse in another sense than that of being amused by it. Indeed one upholder of a similar theory to this—Clive Bell in his "Art"—does say that the purest poetry written by Shakespeare is found in songs with the least sense in them—the "hey-nonny-no" sort of thing. Which is, of course, absurd.

As a matter of fact we cannot divorce the beauty of the sound of a word from its meaning. And if I may use some rather "unpoetic" words for a moment I shall be able to prove this. Italian is said to be a much more musical language than English. But an Italian once remarked that he did not believe this. "You too," he said, "have beautiful sounds in your language. I heard one the other day: 'cellar door.' " And when you say that for the sound it is beautiful. But what English poet has ever used that for its beauty? Not even Mr. McClure to my knowledge. A South American poet gave me a similar example. When he came up from Mexico, he said, the first English word that he singled out struck him as a

beautiful sounding one, and he enjoyed also the image that it gave him—for in his tongue the word would have signified “peak of gold.” But that word was the very humble “cuspidor”—and I am sure it does not occur once in the whole range of English lyrical poetry. I told that to the most lyrically gifted of all the living English poets, and he replied, “Well, from the point of view of beauty of sound, ‘spittoon’ is a beautiful word.” And yet, dear reader, so difficult is it to dissociate sound from sense that I would wager that at least twenty per cent of the collective you is rather displeased with the coarseness of the illustrations I have chosen.

In good poetry the physical beauty of the word must be such as to reënforce its meaning; and meter, assonance, rhyme, are all used to this same end. When we say a poem is beautiful we simply mean that it is successful in expressing, by all these elements, what it sets out to express.

I shall not deal with meter here, because the subject is a technical and a controversial one. In an article on the poetry and metrics of Adelaide Crapsey and in one on “Free Verse and Its Propaganda,” both to be found in a previous book of mine, “First Impressions” (Knopf, 1925) you will find a fairly full discussion of some of these problems. And a more detailed study of meter will be found in a little book, “The Principles of English Prosody” by Lascelles Abercrombie (London: Martin Secker). As a critic



of poetry, all you will be called upon to do in regard to meter is enjoy it. If you find it not easily read, not enjoyable when you are reading it correctly, then you may use the technical apparatus of metrics in analyzing the causes of your dissatisfaction. But as a general thing the technique of meter may be left to the poet. For the study of meter is not an æsthetic study but is merely a sort of grammar. No amount of technical knowledge on the part of the poet will guarantee that his meters will be successful in expressing anything, and the worst poets may be faultlessly correct.

Let us next consider melody, or tone color, in verse. Why does some very simple verse move you emotionally and some very eloquent verse leave you cold? Again, because it is not the idea that moves you in poetry but the expression of the idea, and music is one of the modes of expression. The writer of verse is using words for their sound as well as for their intellectual content. And just as in musical melody we utilize differences of pitch, so when we use this or that vowel sound in verse we are also utilizing differences in pitch—for every vowel sound is uttered in its own relative pitch. This is true, of course, of good prose too. One of my reviewers once wrote of a book that it would “tickle the risibilities” and this phrase is offensive not only because it uses a Latin word where an English one would do, but because that succession of short i-sounds

—like a gentleman, or some one who is not quite a gentleman, hiccoughing—is very unpleasant. On the other hand, here is a line by Robert Bridges, who is speaking of Europa who:

Stept pale against the blue Carpathian sea.

A. E., the Irish poet, wrote, in May 1921, a letter to the London *Times* Literary Supplement, in which he pointed out that very little attention had been paid to the laws underlying this matter of word melody—although Professor Tolman of the University of Chicago has a suggestive article on the subject in his "Hamlet and Other Essays." Here is an example quoted by A. E. from Blake's poem on "The Evening Star":

Speak silence with thy glimmering eye  
And wash the dusk with silver.

And of it he says: "The 'harmony of the dusky sibilants' in the last line is as delicious to the ear as to the imagination."

As an example of the musical effect gained by using related consonants we may take the first stanza of Robert Bridges' "Eros and Psyche":

In midmost length of hundred-citied Crete,  
The land that cradled Zeus of old renown,  
Where grave Demeter nurseried her wheat  
And Minos fashioned law, ere he went down



To judge the quaking hordes of Hell's domain,  
There dwelt a king on the Omphalian plain  
Eastward of Ida, in a little town.

That is very musical, and the reason is that it systematically plays upon that group of letters known as the liquids—m, n, l and r. And the critic reading that opening stanza would be justified in expecting, from its soft, quiet music, that the poem as a whole would have a certain character—idyllic rather than tragic.

That the poets have always paid attention to this factor, that it is not a mere accidental happening due to the nature of the language, is shown by the care with which they have striven for their effects. This care can only be appreciated by studying those poets whose work appears in variorum editions—that is, editions in which every change the poet has made in successive editions of his work is given in footnotes. I shall just give one example. When Collins first published his "Ode to Evening" the opening lines were as follows:

If aught of oaten stop, or pastoral song,  
May hope, O pensive Eve, to soothe thine  
ear . . .

And later he noticed that "hope, O pensive" made a cacophonous combination. To a modern ear, indeed, it would suggest the noise of an auto-

mobile with the muffler open. Of course Collins could not think of that contingency, but in any event he changed the line, and in later editions of his work we find:

If aught of oaten stop, or pastoral song,  
May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest  
ear . . .

But these physical characteristics of poetry are means to an end—that end being expression. What is it that the poet expresses? I have said that it is not ideas. It is the flesh-and-blood reality from which ideas are a mere intellectual abstraction. And what I now have to say applies to fiction and to all other forms of art as well as to poetry. When an artist expresses a mere idea we at once feel his inadequacy. Here is an example. Even the admirers of Tennyson—and in many ways he is an admirable poet even if he be at the moment a little out of fashion—admit that his “Idylls of the King” are far from being his best work. He set out deliberately to hymn the virtues, making King Arthur a mere peg on which to hang some of them. And in consequence we get ethical philosophizing in rhyme rather than poetry. Take this remark about Lancelot:

His honor rooted in dishonor grew  
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true



—referring to Lancelot's love for Guinevere.

It is a good epigram—almost worthy of Oscar Wilde. But note that all the words there are abstract ones—honor, dishonor, faith, false, true. It is an outside view of the situation—that of the thinker. If it expresses anything poetically it expresses Tennyson's patronizing attitude.

The reason I chose that particular couplet—and I admit I do its author some injustice by taking it away from its context—is to contrast it with a really poetic treatment of the same situation. In Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Lancelot" we have this situation not analyzed in intellectual terms but apprehended in terms of what it actually felt like to be in Lancelot's situation. The scene is Joyous Gard, after Lancelot has taken Guinevere there and after he has seen that his doing so has created an impossible situation. He has told her that he must send her back to King Arthur—with assurances of her safety, of course. And Guinevere, from her woman's point of view, cannot see it that way:

Once more he frowned away a threatening  
smile,

But soon forgot the memory of all smiling  
While he gazed on the glimmering face and  
hair

Of Guinevere—the glory of white and gold  
That had been his, and were, for taking of it,  
Still his, to cloud with an insidious gleam,

Of earth, another that was not of earth,  
And so to make of him a thing of night—  
A moth between a window and a star,  
Not wholly lured by one or led by the other.  
The more he gazed upon her beauty there,  
The longer was he living in two kingdoms,  
Not owning in his heart the king of either,  
And ruling not himself.

The point of this is not only that Robinson sympathizes with Lancelot, in the colloquial sense of the word, more than Tennyson did—that alone would not result in poetry—but that in the strict sense of the word he sympathizes with him: that is to say, sees his situation from within rather than from without and so presents that situation to us not in the abstract language of ethics, but in the actual images in which we apprehend life intuitively and immediately.

Our emotional thinking, if I may coin a dangerous phrase, or our feeling about life, is carried on in terms of images. In poetry therefore you find not class-words or concepts but images. These facts have recently been interpreted in a very wrong-headed way. Certain critics, dazzled by the clinical successes of psycho-analysis, have tried to tell us that poems are to be judged not by their “manifest content” but by the analysis of their images along psycho-analytical lines. And so because Cowper wrote a poem to his mother, after he was grown up and should have



forgotten about her, a critic of this school accuses him of being dominated by a mother complex. The whole idea is absurd, of course, for though many poems are really composed in the subconscious, others are largely composed by the conscious mind. And even where a poem is not only conceived but written, so to speak, in a dream, it is not necessarily a dream that is to be interpreted in terms of Freudian analysis. For instance "Kubla Khan" was actually composed in a dream. And it is full of images and symbols. These ought therefore to yield on analysis some dark passages in Coleridge's life. But as a matter of fact he had been reading the voyages of Purchas a day or so before he dreamed the poem, and he took most of his images directly from a passage he had read, and one or two from an earlier reading of Milton. For a sane interpretation of how the poetic mind does combine and re-combine its images I refer the reader to John Livingston Lowes' "The Road to Xanadu," in which the history of Coleridge's images is painstakingly traced and their building into his poems exhibited.

### ART: GOOD, BAD, MAJOR, MINOR

If every work of art is the expression of a personal vision of this or that bit of experience—either directly reported in its objective aspects or reported largely in terms of one's subjective

reaction to the outer occasion—and if no two people are quite alike, and therefore no two reports of any experience can be alike, what becomes of the stock-in-trade of the earlier critics—their categories of the forms of art? For no two works of art can be alike, and therefore they cannot be classified. And yet we are always talking of the novel, the play, the epic, the lyric, the ode, the pastoral, major poetry, minor poetry, and so on. Indeed if every work of art is unique and therefore not to be compared to another work of art, how can we even say that it is good or bad? Of course there is the old moralistic criterion—a poem that teaches a noble lesson is a good poem, one that does not is a bad poem. But if that criterion be taken, Burns must rank lower as a poet than Watts the hymn-writer.

And it is a fact that a poem—or any other work of art—can be judged only in terms of itself. A lyric which is perfect is, by that very fact, not to be considered inferior to “King Lear.” But, while we admit this unique quality of every work of art there is a scale by which the arts can be arranged in a hierarchy of importance—though not, it will be noticed, of good, better and best. For a work of art is good in so far as it achieves its purpose—which may be a humble one: the expression of the very simplest intuition. If it does not achieve its purpose it is, in so far, not art at all.

It may be because a contemporary Italian



philosopher, Benedetto Croce, has insisted upon the unique character of the work of art or it may be due to a complicated series of causes of which that is only one, but at any rate within the last forty years there has been a movement among all artists toward a new sort of individualism. The movement is not without partial parallels—witness Gongorism in Spain, described in a recent book by Elisha Kane (The University of North Carolina Press)—but it has never, I think, been quite paralleled in its world-wide extent and in its manifestation among all the arts. It seems to be based on this statement by the artist:

If this or that symbol expresses my intuition and makes it possible for me to record it and re-live it, I set that symbol down. That you may not understand my symbol or my transcription of it, is none of my affair.

And so we get the sort of poetry that Wallace Stevens gives us; the poetry of the Italian Futurist school which goes much further to the left than that of Wallace Stevens; and at the very extreme, Dadaism—which is, however, avowedly anarchistic. Here is an example of a poem by William Carlos Williams from "Mannikin No. 2" (New York: Monroe Wheeler) entitled "The Rose":

The rose is obsolete  
but each petal ends in  
an edge, the double facet  
cementing the grooved  
columns of air—the edge  
cuts without cutting  
meets—nothing—renews  
itself in metal or porcelain—

whither? It ends—

But if it ends  
the start is begun  
so that to engage roses  
becomes a geometry—

Sharper, neater, more cutting  
figured in majolica—  
the broken plate  
glazed with a rose

Somewhere the sense  
makes copper roses  
steel roses—

The rose carried weight of love  
but love is at the end—of roses

It is at the edge of the  
petal that love waits



Crisp, worked to defeat  
laboredness—fragile  
plucked, moist, half-raised  
cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's  
edge and the

From the petal's edge a line starts  
that being of steel  
infinitely fine, infinitely  
rigid penetrates  
the Milky Way  
without contact—lifting  
from it—neither hanging  
nor pushing—

The fragility of the flower  
unbruised  
penetrates space.

How is the critic going to handle a poem like that? Many people allow themselves to become irritated and call the author names. As Dr. Williams is an educated man, a physician (incidentally; that of course has nothing to do with the poem in hand), we ought at least to assume that he knows what he is about. All we can justly say in criticism of the poem, in case it means

nothing to us, is that it lacks transmission value, but the very fact that Dr. Williams published it in a book shows that he thinks it has transmission value for at least some people.

However, I get a very decided impression from this poem. There is something about the extreme edge of a rose petal which reminds one of the corresponding thinness of a razor edge, and we can imagine this delicate line cutting space with a definiteness that is akin to rigidity; and that cutting space as it does causes the imagination to "produce" it as the student of Euclid would say, and link it up with the whole geometry of space. And then there is the parallel between this vanishing edge with its suggestion of all space and the impalpable *locus* of the mysterious, apparently unmotivated power of love.

To try to criticize the poem, therefore, beyond the point where it moved one, to say it was "bad" unless we were very sure of Dr. Williams' intention in writing it, would be quite unjustifiable. However, as a general thing, we are justified in saying that a work of art is only a work of art in the full sense when others besides the creator of it can appropriate it—when, that is to say, in the spiritual sense, it is published—and to publish in a book what is not publishable to the mind of the reader of the book is not a very logical proceeding. And this in spite of the fact that of late years it has become a popular one, defended on the ground that if one out of a hundred read-



ers does "get" the poem the poet has achieved all the public he was expecting.

But we are justified in asking of any poem that it possess "transmission value"; that is, that something is really "put across." Given that, what other criteria may we lay down for the evaluation of poetry—or for the novel or drama as far as that goes? In answer to that question I shall give examples of poetry that may justly be called minor, major, and bad. Here is a lyric by Walter de la Mare, entitled "Silver" (Collected Poems: Holt):

Slowly, silently, now the moon  
Walks the night in her silver shoon;  
This way and that, she peers and sees  
Silver fruit upon silver trees;  
One by one the casements catch  
Her beams beneath the silvery thatch.  
Couched in his kennel, like a log,  
With paws of silver sleeps the dog;  
From their shadowy cotes the white breasts  
    peep  
Of doves in a silver-feathered sleep;  
A harvest mouse goes scampering by,  
With silver claws, and silver eye;  
And moveless fish in the water gleam,  
By silver reeds in a silver stream.

That poem is technically faultless, it is a beautiful picture, and it reconstitutes for us an experience we have all had, though in a dimmer

and more fragmentary manner. But it is a "minor" poem because it simply takes one event, or a series of events on one level of perception. Of course minor poetry may be just as important as a great deal of poetry that tries to be major: if we could invest every sensory experience of life with a beauty and glamour comparable to Mr. de la Mare's experience of moonlight, our lives would indeed be happy and exciting.

But poetry is often more complicated than that. Moonlight may be enjoyed for itself or it may be a natural symbol of other experiences on deeper levels than the sensory. Instead of the "innocent eye"—to use an expression from the æsthetics of painting—transmitting a picture, eye and thought may combine, and thought may find in the moon a fit symbol for a man's vicissitudes. So we find Sir Philip Sidney, love-sick, seeing in the moon a symbol of his own frame of mind, and in a sonnet saying:

With how sad steps, O Moone, thou climbst  
the skies,

How silently, and with how wanne a face!

What, may it be that even in heavenly place

That busie archer his sharpe arrowes tries . . .

I need not quote the whole sonnet, for it is well known. But here we have art still minor—and indeed coming dangerously near to "the pathetic fallacy" in its ascription of feelings to the



moon—but still of a more complex character than the simple lyric quoted above.

Through this growing complexity we reach at length major art—art in which the whole experience of man, his intellectual triumphs, his emotional defeats, his aspirations and the crushing weight of reality, are forged into unified æsthetic experiences. This does not mean that the major poet solves our difficulties for us—as Croce remarks somewhere, philosophy can only solve philosophical questions, practical action must solve practical difficulties. But the major poet can reconcile us to the ills of life by showing us that they are an inevitable part of experience, implicated in the good of life.

Lascelles Abercrombie, whose books "Toward a Theory of Art" and "The Theory of Poetry" I am leaning on here, quotes Bacon's aphorism that poetry submits the shows of things to the desires of the mind. That does not mean, he says, that poetry portrays the sort of universe our senses would like. For the desire of the mind is for order, coherence, the relation of one thing to another. The mind cannot contemplate chaos. But our everyday life is always to some extent chaotic. We try to achieve order—but still we have slums, murders, accidental deaths, we miss trains. From our everyday point of view those things are chaotic, contingent, without reason. The artist takes this or that set of experiences, each experience including, we must remember, the inner

response as well as the outer occasion, and he gives them to us in terms of a logic which we call unity when we recognize it in a work of art. We read even a tragedy and enjoy it, for we see the disaster to the hero not as a brutal blow from the void—as a fatal street accident would appear to us—but as something implicit in all that has gone before, as something necessitated. The mind therefore enjoys tragedy, even though the nerves would not enjoy it if the hero were killed on the stage—and the Greeks, knowing this, did not kill their hero on the stage. That was left for the blunter and bloodier Elizabethans.

Note that merely covering a large canvas does not make art major—it is easy to talk about large and complex issues of life and death, but to realize them imaginatively is another matter altogether.

Great poetry, then, must be poetry which not only raises great issues but which realizes them. Minor poetry may deal with the smallest issues, with the veriest floating wisps of emotion—but it too must realize them. What is bad poetry? Well, a lot of bad poetry is simply words where there should be thoughts and feelings. One of the best writers of bad poetry, among poets that is, was William Wordsworth. He once spoke of a lady:

With unescutcheoned privacy interred  
Far from the Family Vault



and you will find other instances from him and from other English poets in an amusing article by Edith Sichel in Volume I of the "Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association" (Oxford University Press). Such an assemblage of words as we have just quoted is, of course, a lapse: the occasion, in the poem, was unimportant and so the poet let his attention slip and, having no sense of humor, never saw what a howler he had committed. And there is the badness due to *clichés*—"the nodding violet" and "the babbling brook" and "the raging main." These may disfigure a poem that is good in spots, but some poems are a composite spiritual *cliché*—the poem that tells us, for example, that we have no friend like mother.

And this last badness is not merely formal—it hurts the spiritual life of those who read it, for it fixes the *cliché* attitude. The stereotyped mother of the conventional Mother's Day poet takes the place in a weak mind of the individual reality of this or that particular mother. So that we love to see our mothers sitting in rocking chairs knitting—for that is the way the poet has it—when they might be much better off playing a little golf.

## CHAPTER VIII

### FICTION, SHORT STORY, DRAMA

BEFORE dealing with the criticism of fiction there are two points to be noted about æsthetic theory. The first concerns form in art. You sometimes hear people speak as though poetry were a formal art and fiction an art in which it was content that counted. This is an unwarranted distinction that can only lead to confusion.

To be sure, some people have laid down formal rules for the novel, but formal rules, even in poetry, never lead to the achievement of æsthetic form. They merely lead to imitations of set patterns, and pattern and form are far from being the same. Thus, to speak of the sonnet form is misleading. What we really mean there is the sonnet pattern. Now if you have an experience a verbal record of which can be made in the number of syllables that will fit a sonnet pattern, if there is a rising phase of that experience which will go into your octet and a falling, or commentative, or climactic phase that will go into the sestet, you have an opportunity to achieve poetic



form. But if you have to clip or distort your experience to get it said in sonnet pattern, you have not thereby achieved form—rather you have lost it and have produced the ugly instead of the beautiful.

And so, while the novel and the short story have no set patterns—except the commercial short story which we shall deal with later—they have their possibilities of form. And even so patternless a short story as Sherwood Anderson gives us in his “Winesburg” tales, if it truly express a unified experience, has achieved artistic form. For, in that deeper sense, form is not a pattern but is simply any expression or description, or whatever you wish to call it, of a unified experience. And because the experience is unified, that is to say, envisaged as a whole, as one experience and not as a series or a jumble of experiences, its expression will in turn appeal to the reader as a unified mental experience.

Hence the truth of the old contention that a work of art should have variety in unity. Though not for the old-fashioned reason. Not because the universe is variety in unity and a work of art should imitate it, for after all we do not know if the universe is fundamentally a unity or not. William James was sure that it was not. The reason is simply that what our mind demands in all its experiences is unity—that things should hang together. In “real life” things do not hang together and the contingent is always breaking in

on our plans. In art anything that does not minister to the whole, that does not belong in the picture, is felt as an intrusion and is a cause of offence—and “form” therefore is achieved by eliminating rather than by building.

The other point is that when I speak of a book as a work of art and a book as a repository of knowledge or an advocate of opinion, I am not speaking in absolute terms. The driest book of facts is likely to convey something of an æsthetic impression to any one who admires the way in which the facts are marshalled; the most fervid work of propaganda on behalf of proportional representation is likely to convey an æsthetic impression to the reader who not only scans the pages but imaginatively sees the eloquent advocate behind the array of statistics. And on the other hand, outside of music and the region of purely decorative or perhaps futurist drawing, one rarely sees a work of art which does not also have values other than æsthetic—documentary values we usually call them, as for example when we learn from Joseph Hergesheimer’s “Java Head” some of the history of Salem.

It is important to remember this in connection with the novel, for while some novels keep pretty close to the ideal of strict artistic form, others wander all over the place and break all the rules of the novel, and yet make very enjoyable reading. Some people have so far misinterpreted Croce’s doctrine of art as the expression of intui-



tion as to be bothered not only by those wandering novels, so to call them, but by complex works in which there are stretches of conceptual writing. I once saw, indeed, in a book on religion and art, the observation that, while Croce's theory might be in the main true, there certainly were exceptions: in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" for instance there is much logical thinking both in the construction of the play and also in the things that the characters say.

The answer to this is simple. Of course a large part of our life is spent in thinking things out and acting upon the findings of our reason. And all this must be represented in fiction. But it is represented only after the chains of reasoning are complete and are viewed as a whole—that is to say, intuited.

Of course for people who do not use Croce's particular terminology this confusion might not arise. But it does arise I think in another form. Some people complain of a novel of the type of Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain" or of a play by Bernard Shaw, that there is too much discussion, argumentation, or idea in it and not enough action or drama. That criticism is valid only if the ideas are thrown in as it were from the outside. If a character takes half of his time on the stage—whether the stage be of the theater or of the reader's mind—to express random ideas, the criticism is justified. But if those ideas are a valid part of the character, if they play their

part in effecting further actions on the part of other characters, then the criticism is not justified.

Indeed, novels have been written in which an idea was the real hero and precipitated the action.

And so the difference between Spengler's "The Decline of the West" and Mann's "The Magic Mountain" is not that one is full of ideas about democracy, time, national cultures, and that the other is a book of adventures of a number of consumptive people. They are both books filled with ideas on those subjects—though taken from two differing points of view. The real difference is that Spengler just gives you the ideas. Mann asks you to watch with him the impact of those ideas on living people. And so far as Spengler gives you his ideas not in a vacuum but in terms of their historical rise and historical effects he is writing as an artist—but as a particular kind of artist, whose material is factual: the historian, to wit. And in so far as Mann gives you not only the effect of ideas on his characters, but takes pains to express the ideas themselves very clearly, he is more than an artist in the narrow sense: he is a philosopher.

Indeed, for every discipline of life—philosophy, history, psychology, the special psychology of sex, exploration, religion, social reform, there is a corresponding type of novel. And of late years we have even developed the novel that borrows the psychoanalyst's technique and follows



an individual mind in all its sinuous wanderings: James Joyce's "Ulysses," Dorothy Richardson's "Pilgrimage," and Marcel Proust's long series of "Remembrance of Things Past."

If I were writing a text book for novelists instead of for critics I could make much of the special technique of the novel. I could point out that a novelist can write in two ways—as a dramatist, in action and dialogue, keeping himself invisible, or as a chronicler injecting his own comments after the leisurely manner of Thackeray. I might point out also that the latter method is more dilute than the former, that the "illusion" is not so complete. I could show that in nearly every novel both methods are used—chronicle to give the sense of time and to keep the story moving, drama when the big situations are reached.

And I should also write about the point of view—whether that of the omniscient author, who sees all and tells all, or that of the author who works from inside the mind of one character and who therefore knows only what is going on in that mind and not what the other characters are thinking.

But the labor has already been performed by the one living critic most capable of performing it. That is Percy Lubbock. Mr. Lubbock was for a time secretary to Henry James, whose chief interest as a novelist lay in exploiting "point of view." Mr. Lubbock explains this aspect of technique very elaborately in "The Craft of Fic-

tion," and then in three novels, "Earlham," "Roman Pictures" and "The Region Cloud," goes on to give a cumulative demonstration of his own principles by actually putting them to work.

"The Craft of Fiction" is probably the best single volume ever published on the technique of the novel. But if you find it difficult reading, you will be glad to know that in what is probably the next best book, in English at least, on the same subject, "Aspects of the Novel" by E. M. Forster, the author, after praising Mr. Lubbock's explication of James's methods, says that in his opinion the central problem of novel writing is how to drive a coach and pair through all the rules that Mr. Lubbock codifies, and "bounce the reader" from one point of view to another without his noticing it.

As to which of these gentlemen is right, I should say that both are. In certain forms of the novel, the rather short, intensively done tale with emphasis on unity, the rules must be observed. Take, for example, Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady." Every word in that book contributes toward the whole: the æsthetic pleasure we get from it is the intense one of watching a life swayed by the fatality of its own temperament. One note off the key, one slip by the author from the point of view chosen—that of a boy growing into manhood and first seeing and later hearing of the career of the lost lady—would be fatal.

On the other hand when we read a long, ram-



bling novel by Dickens, or when we read Fielding's "Tom Jones" with its little moral essays at the beginning of each chapter, we are enjoying both the novel and the author. We like it no matter how flagrantly the author jumps in with this and that little thing that he has picked up somewhere and that he wants us to admire. To rebuke him solemnly in the name of Croce or any other pontiff would be absurd. Indeed a great enough man can offend flagrantly and get away with it. Milton, in his "Lycidas"—a lament for a dead friend—had no more warrant to drag in his comminatory lines regarding the "corrupt clergy" than I would have to break suddenly in on the argument of this chapter by remarking that if the editor of a certain weekly paper happens to see this I hereby tell him that if he does not pay me that money he owes me for an article I will sue him. But it happened that Milton at the time he wrote "Lycidas" was not only sorrowing for his dead friend but was indignant about the clergy. So he put it in, and no sensible person has ever wanted to take it out.

And apart from these possible methods—dramatic or chronicle writing, the choice of a point of view, the representation of states of mind by the behavioristic method of watching the actions of the characters or by the psycho-analytic method of following their vaguest ramblings and reveries, there are literally no rules at all for the novel.

You might suppose that the novelist must at least begin at the beginning and follow through to the end. But even that is not mandatory. Louis Couperus, the Dutch novelist and one of the greatest of all European writers of the nineteenth century, begins one novel at the end and works back to the beginning—"Old People and the Things that Pass." A form that seems to be growing popular is the novel that takes one day in the middle of the life of a character and from the events of that single day reveals to you the past and possibly the future. An English example of that method is Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" and an American example is Margaret Leech's "Tin Wedding." Both are well worth reading, by the way.

I have already explained why novels should never try to put over "moral lessons" but that, as I said, does not mean that they should not deal with general ideas and even with moral ideas. They may do this in more than one way. Through satire—as in Sinclair Lewis's books, which pay for the topical nature of their themes and their manner of treating them by placing themselves almost in the category of journalism—or in a more general way. Mr. Lewis is, of course, creative. His *Babbitt* really does live, and thus has a chance of surviving his period of journalistic interest. "Arrowsmith," on the other hand, will probably not make very thrilling reading when medical



research and practice have so advanced that Mr. Lewis's specific criticisms no longer apply.

As an example of a more general way of treating moral ideas, we may take the work of the English novelist, Sylvia Townsend Warner. In her first novel, "Lolly Willowes, or The Loving Huntsman," she has a very real leading character—an unmarried woman who revolts against all that is implied in the fact that she is just an "aunt" and living under her married sister's roof. And so she leaves, and, as the novelist puts it, sells her soul to the devil—who is quite a gentleman. But essentially the story asserts one great moral idea: that each one of us is an individual, that society does not have a total claim on us, and that we should not merely render unto the Cæsar of society that which is Cæsar's, but that we should render unto ourselves that which belongs to ourselves. And in Miss Warner's second novel, "Mr. Fortune's Maggot," a beautiful tale brimming with humor in spite of its quiet tragedy, the book sums itself up into a vivid, compelling realization that "each man kills the thing he loves"—unless, like Mr. Fortune, he catches himself doing it. And so this clever, up-to-date, sophisticated novel does, after all, have a moral. But it is a real moral—not the pseudo-ethical claptrap of Harold Bell Wright. And this fact is important to note: it does not preach it. There is not a homiletic word or gesture in

the book. It simply exhibits a situation and lets the reader make his own application.

How are you going to apply all this, and what other criteria are you going to apply, to the criticism of the novel? In the first place you must expect something interesting and if you are bored you must try to discover whether you are bored because the novel is too difficult for you to follow or because it is too easy. For Henry James is not so easy to read as others we could mention. But to be bored because you could not make sense of Henry James would not give you the same feeling as being bored by the puerilities of Harold Bell Wright. So, if you do not feel drawn on by the story find out why.

Secondly you should watch your author's methods. If he merely tells you that so-and-so is a genius, you should be skeptical and, to use academic language, you should remark "Show me." Never take the novelist's word for a thing but make him exhibit the thing. As an example of what I mean take the opening paragraphs of E. B. C. Jones's "Quiet Interior":

Claire went slowly upstairs, pulling off her reindeer gloves. As her head came level with the landing window, which looked out on to the paved court of a club, she saw the fine black tracery of leafless plane trees against the blue October sky. There was some magic for her in leafless boughs; she loved



their austerity, the rhythm of their lines, unblurred by bursting, sticky buds, pricked vernal leaves, thick drooping foliage, tassels, streaks or cones of bloom. She loved etchings, the sharp silhouette of crags and masonry; rain frozen in hard ruts; dew on dark thorns; frost pencillings on the pane; the pale tints and thin lines of a wintry countryside. But this taste for severity and pallor was no indication of asceticism; it was as sensuous and æsthetic as another's love for deep banks of flowers, luxurious fabrics. One standing before an espalier crucified upon the wall, would rejoice if an apricot, sunned through to the core, dropped into his hand; and Claire's joy in the pattern of the espalier and its slender leaves would be no less.

There was in her appearance a clue to her tastes—something fastidious and delicately somber in her dress; something "slender and austere" in the lines and colors of her countenance. Her face was pale and significant only because it was clear-cut; her hair dark and well under control; her clothes mole-grey. Nothing in her, as it were, broke out—not a vivid jewel or ribbon nor a predominating feature; her facial irregularities were not sufficiently marked to mar the whole effect of intaglio-like fineness and restraint:

she would always be—precious, perhaps, but not generally prized. . . .

The author has not, on her own responsibility, told you a single thing about Claire. She has simply given you a picture of Claire, and it is you who, if you have imagination, know after reading that passage, that Claire would not do this or that, that in certain circumstances she would not reach out a hand to grasp happiness. Indeed I have claimed that just as a palæontologist can reconstruct an extinct animal from a single bone, so an imaginative person could almost write the story of Claire from that one picture—and I once asked a university class to do it, merely telling them that a sister and a man were the other characters, and they came remarkably close to unanimous agreement with the author as to what was bound to happen.

To show the fault corresponding to this virtue let us look at an almost forgotten novel by Winston Churchill. In "The Dwelling Place of Light" he treated, topically, the I. W. W.—this was before the war when that organization was still treatable by polite and patriotic novelists. He had a factory, driving bosses, an I. W. W. organizer and a beautiful girl who became interested in the I. W. W. doctrines—but she had first become interested in the personality of the manager of the mill. Mr. Churchill's main interest was not in showing the growth of the girl's char-



acter or the oncoming of her fate, but in showing "what was doing" at the time. And so, when he has permitted the manager to seduce the girl—for one must have events in a novel—and has then killed off the manager—because in industrial wars people do get killed off—he is left as he nears the end of his tale with an unmarried lady, financially unprovided for, who is about to have a child. And after she had had the child what is to be done? He cannot let her live happily ever after, for that would be bad morals. Therefore he provides a home for the child and then blandly informs us that the heroine just curled up and died. Inevitable? Part of a real life-pattern? Not at all. Women who have children and survive after the shock and strain of having them, do not die—they get a little stouter, a little healthier, they develop from girls into women. But this one died. And you may also remember in Sinclair Lewis's "Arrowsmith" the extremely painful death of the doctor's first wife. She got an infection, during that plague in the island. But she had to go round Robin Hood's barn in order to get it, and the reader knew that not Nemesis, not fate, not nature, killed her off but Mr. Lewis's imperative need of a second and richer wife for Dr. Arrowsmith in order to show us that a rich wife is not the help she ought to be to a conscientious research worker.

I have said that the author should play a square

game: be it exhibiting the emotions of individuals, the impact of general ideas, or even a moral, and that he should play it according to the rule of the game, which is to exhibit your characters as they are, and not merely to label them. In the opening of "Quiet Interior" you have seen one example of that. For other examples you should read two books which taken together as an exhibit are unique in the literature of the novel. They are the two novels which Henry James left unfinished at his death and which were published, with his dictated notes on how he meant to develop them, with introductions by Percy Lubbock.

In these two books, "The Sense of the Past" and "The Ivory Tower" we have the beginnings completed and then James's notes in which he had sketched, for his own use entirely, the outlines of the endings and the means which he intended to use to "put his characters over." To those unversed in writing, some of his technical difficulties will seem almost self-created—that of choosing good names for his characters, for instance—but that will be because the unversed reader does not know how the smallest detail will create its impression: the reader's sympathy for a character might be ruined, for example, by giving him a name that jars or that has bad associations.

Here is just one example of the sort of thing



that in James's estimation matters. In "The Sense of the Past" he injects a contemporary character into the opening years of the nineteenth century—which meant into an eighteenth century moral atmosphere. A subtle series of distinctions in certain valuations, of tastes and morals, is then exhibited. The question is how the reader shall be assisted to see these as the author sees them: how the reader will be put in a position to see how each side in the game played between the transferred modern and his co-actors misunderstands the other side—although this does not mean that the book deals with anything so gross as a mere comedy of errors. But Ralph, this man from a later age, will naturally appear a little strange to these eighteenth-century people, and here are some of the elements in that strangeness:

Rather beautiful does it seem to me to have two or three of his actual modern facts stick to him and operate in this sense that I try to project: notably his "refinement," though he tries to conceal it, to dissimulate it; notably his being in 1820 as "rich" as he is, or was, in 1910—which counts for an immense well-offness at the earlier period. And then his whole true modern attribute and quality, with a distinguished appearance to match it, and certain things *dont-il ne peut pas se défaire*, that are of the modern pitch

of material civilization, like his perfect and *soignéés* teeth, for example, which that undentisted age can't have known the like of, and which constitute a part of his troubled consciousness of complication. . . .

The point is that any novelist could merely say that Ralph was different—only a genius would know that part of the strangeness which these cruder people felt in his personality would be due to a physical detail like good teeth.

Realization—that is the point. Does the author realize his characters and his settings and his background? And does he give each its rights? If he is warping any one of them for ulterior ends he is a bad artist even though he may be an earnest moralist. But what he realizes is his own business. He has a right to deal with action, with persons, with moral ideas as affecting the lives of persons. Indeed novels have been written about animals—though far too often their psychology has been mere sentimental guess work.

### COMPARISONS

I have already spoken of comparison as a critical method. In reviewing a serious novel comparison is never the main thing, though it is often of great incidental interest. In mystery and detective stories it may often be used because in those fields we have a lot of pot-boiling, and



authors often imitate successful methods or use plots which are a common heritage. This is more true of detective stories, which are all alike in their ground plan and which appeal primarily to the reader's ingenuity in following chains of logic. The mystery story on the other hand makes an emotional appeal when it is a genuine one. For it is important to notice that there are two sorts of mystery stories. For the genuine thing I call your attention to the works of Walter de la Mare. Whether the reader believe in ghosts or not he must admit that many people have had experiences which seemed to them supernatural. These experiences Mr. de la Mare treats in a masterly way—both in his short stories and in one or two of his longer books—"The Return," for example. A ghost may be a reality or it may be created subjectively because a man fears a ghost—in either event it is a reality for the percipient. On the other hand, Algernon Blackwood writes—or has in every book of his that I have read—a fake mystery story. That is to say he creates a situation in which supernatural beings function, and then, in his dénouement he explains these beings and their actions in terms of theosophy or occultism of some sort. So that if you believe in that sort of thing you are led out of the atmosphere of mystery into that of rational explanation, and if you do not believe in that sort of thing you feel cheated.

One fault of the amateur reviewer of fiction is to begin by making a comparison and then failing to carry it through. I recently read this example. A reviewer began a notice of an English novel, "Cursed be the Treasure" by a new English writer, H. B. Drake, with the remark: "English critics compare the author to Conrad and Stevenson, and surely this book is as great an adventure story as 'Treasure Island.' " Now, in the first place one of those comparisons must be a bad one and therefore not worth repeating. For if Mr. Drake resembles Conrad he cannot resemble Stevenson. Not only is Conrad a much greater writer than Stevenson but even when he uses the same factual material—adventure on the high seas or on tropical islands—he uses it in a different way. But having made this point in the opening paragraph the reviewer does nothing to develop it and does not even give enough evidence in the course of the review so that the reader may develop it for himself. She simply tells the story, in synopsis, of a treasure that brought a curse to whomsoever owned it. Indeed the book, if we judged it only by what she says about it, might have been an ordinary exciting boys' adventure story.

If, instead of bothering to make any comparisons the reviewer had given us not only a summary of the outer events of the book but an idea of the spirit in which those events were



handled—whether for their own excitement or to reveal the character of the people involved or to reveal how destiny has its way with people—she would have been criticizing the book adequately. As it is she does nothing that is worth our while.

### THE SHORT STORY

The growing interest in the short story warrants a few words on that form, which shall be mostly words of warning. The sort of short story around which that growing interest centers is an artificial product. A magazine proprietor found that at a certain point of circulation he hit the law of diminishing returns. That is to say the advertising rate justified by his circulation reached a point where advertisers no longer found it attractive. They preferred to split their appropriation among different magazines with different publics, and each with a smaller rate. This proprietor also noticed that his presses were not working all the time. Therefore when his magazine reached its saturation point of profitable circulation he did not push it any further but started another magazine. We have now a number of companies that print four or more magazines on the same presses, without increase of overhead charges, and they get advertising for all of them.

Naturally they have to have stories for all of them. And these stories must be of a popular type. In consequence a vast industry of teaching people to write short stories has arisen. To do this a certain formula is evolved, the student learns the formula and all he has to do is to fit curious episodes—see any daily paper—and new characters to his formula.

The most scientific of these formulas is that of Professor Pitkin of Columbia who has written two text books of the short story. He tells us that the short story must be dramatic and that it must aim at a single effect—the latter rule is our old friend unity again. And in some sense every short story must be dramatic—something has to happen or there is no story. Then he tells us that in order to make a convincing and complete story the dominant character must be exhibited in four stages. Firstly something must happen to him which disturbs his *status quo*. Mr. Pitkin instances De Maupassant's "The Coward" where the lady who is the guest of "the dominant character" complains that a man has looked at her insultingly. Secondly the dominant character must do something about it—this is his immediate response to the situation and that response precipitates a new situation. In this instance the dominant character challenges the offender to a duel. The new situation is that a man who a moment ago had not a care in the world now has



a duel on his hands. Thirdly there must be a "reflective delay," during which the dominant character thinks on what he has done and on what he has to do next. During this delay in "The Coward" the dominant character begins to wonder if after all he is going to turn out to be a coward. Fourthly, as a result of the thoughts and feelings of the period of reflective delay, the character makes his final response to the situation. In this case he shoots himself. All these stages are necessary, says Professor Pitkin, because one leads to another and if you omit one you cannot understand the next. Another scheme for the analysis of the short story will be found in *The Writer* for 1925—a monthly magazine published in Cambridge, Mass., and the best in its field. It was evolved by John Galsworthy. He analyzes the short story into an introduction or piece of exposition which sets the stage, and into scenes leading to an ending. Each scene consists of overt actions acting upon the character and causing him to do this or that or to change in this or that way. The resulting changes make the next scene.

Both schemes are sound and both will produce good stories—if you have good material to put into them. But if you try to apply either method of analysis to a typical story of Anton Chekhov or of Walter de la Mare you may come to the conclusion that neither of them knows his busi-

ness as a short story writer. An absurd conclusion in one way and in another not so absurd, for I am sure that either writer would have hard sledding if he tried to sell his "stuff" to Ainslie's or the *All Story Magazine*.

I shall not say anything about the criticism of drama in this book, for drama is only a special case of fiction, and the one-act play is the analogue of the short story. Expand the stage directions of a one-act play into descriptions of settings, backgrounds and "business" of characters, incorporate that material, in the same type, with your dialogue—and behold, a short story. The only difference between the long play and the novel is that in the long play the author cannot "butt in"—except to take a curtain call—and that in the novel he may—though usually he ought not to. And in the play the subjective elements have to be exhibited through action—or to some extent, though this is hardly dramatic, described by other characters—while in the novel they may be treated in innumerable ways. And when I add that the publisher and printer of a novel give you the novel as the author wrote it, whereas in the drama a producer steps in and remodels the play so that its own author does not recognize it on dress rehearsal, I have just about covered the subject. From the point of view of criticism, especially of the printed play—for to criticize the acting of a young and beautiful lady



whom you may meet socially the next day is something quite outside of our province—the critic needs no principles for treating drama that he has not already learned from his observation of the novel and of poetry.

## CHAPTER IX

### HOW TO COLLECT FACTS AND PREPARE PAPERS

CRITICISM of books and of ideas is not only to be found in periodicals but is an increasingly important activity in woman's clubs, civic organizations, religious societies and in small social groups that meet for discussion of this or that question. And while this criticism is amateur in nature and expression, much of it is very good and even when it is not good it is important. For as Professor Dewey tells us in his "The Public and Its Problems," the public is in eclipse at present because a great technologically motivated society has evolved, ruled by special interests, and the public, with machinery of political expression molded to suit simpler conditions, has not adjusted itself to the new situation. Nor can it do so until, by discussion, the dissemination of facts, and criticism, it has learned to correlate its interests with those of the great economic powers that to-day form our "invisible government."

Hence the most inexperienced member of the smallest woman's club, when she reads a paper on current literature, current affairs, or even on



a local topic, is doing something of real importance—for she is bringing some phase of life into a clear focus where it may be studied and understood. Or she ought to be. Even if she is taking the wrong side and obscuring the issue she is doing so before people who will be able to express disagreement, and so clarify the issue by debate.

But while this activity is important it is not always well managed. Not a month goes by but some one inquires of me where they can find a review that they read in the *Friday Literary Review* a month or a year ago—and they invariably tell me that they have to read a paper on the author or the book, that they do not quite know what to say on the subject and that they wish to get “some points.” That is the worst possible way to prepare a paper. On the other hand, if you wish to look up a number of reviews and compare them, the place to go is not the newspaper office—which is frequently unable to supply back numbers—but the library.

Suppose that you have to read a paper on some contemporary American author, and that you wish to include in it not only your opinion of the author but an estimate of critical opinion of his work. All you have to do is to go to the nearest public library and ask to see *The Book Review Digest* and *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* (published monthly except June and July by the H. W. Wilson Company of

Minneapolis, Minn.), in the event that you are not near a library and want to subscribe. These and a number of specialized Indexes published by the same company, will give you references to and quotations from reviews of the books which you wish to cover. In one library, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, there is a card index to reviews of all the works of a number of important authors, and through its use, if you happen to be near it or in a town where the library has a similar service, you will be able to find out just what the contemporary opinion was of the first books of such veteran writers as H. G. Wells or Bernard Shaw. In the ordinary library you would have to consult the volumes of "Poole's Index to Periodical Literature" (now discontinued) to get such information.

And of course you ought to read just for general information a few of the present-day literary supplements—those published in New York and Chicago—and you ought to read them consistently enough to be able to make proper allowances for their differing policies.

But suppose your job is not the preparation of a book review but a paper on an author, perhaps an author long dead, or on such a general subject as Socialism, Income Taxation, the Nordic question, Immigration, or Mendelian inheritance. How are you to go about it? The easiest thing of course is to consult an encyclopædia. An encyclopædia, however, is never quite up-to-date



and it will not give you anything that your audience could not easily find for themselves. But if you are rusty on your subject, or uncertain of it, it will refresh your memory and give you an idea of the subject, and it will probably give you a bibliography—which will be its most important service. Possibly a quicker way to get at least a few titles on any subject is to consult that very useful book, "The American Library Association Catalogue, 1926: An annotated Basic List of 10,000 books" edited by Isabella M. Cooper, in which you will find the title, publisher and price of the book, followed by a synopsis which is enough to show you if the book will be helpful. But you must remember that in every field of knowledge important books have been written since 1926. You will also derive help in many subjects from the pamphlets now being published by the American Library Association under the general title of "Reading with a Purpose."

As to what books you shall use in gathering your information, my advice is always to get as close to the original source of information as possible. Thus it is better to read Bergson's "Creative Evolution" even though some parts of it are very difficult reading than it is to read a popular book on Bergson—some of them are even more difficult to understand than Bergson himself, and there is always the risk that the popularizer's interpretation of Bergson, being one step removed, when interpreted again by you

will be much more than one step removed from Bergson's real meaning. And we have only to think of the popular and panegyric lives of a number of our statesmen to see the danger of failing to go to original sources when we are studying history. Thus, if you are doing a paper on George Washington you should at least read Rupert Hughes' life and if possible refer to the printed volumes of Washington's diaries.

In a number of fields you will find yearly summaries of what has been going on. Under the imprint of Dodd, Mead & Co. you will find a number of anthologies dealing with—and reprinting—the best American, the best English and the best European short stories of the year. Burns Mantle is the editor of a series of "Best Plays" of the year. Stanley Braithwaite has published for a number of years a collection of the best poems of the year—though his selections are not always discriminatingly made—supplemented by lists of books on poetry and articles about poetry and poets. For science and philosophy you will find the current numbers and the bound volumes of the *Hibbert Journal*, the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, the *Philosophical Review*, the *International Journal of Ethics*, and *Nature* handy. The application of ethics to public life is covered in *The Survey-Graphic*. In a more popular manner the *Literary Digest* and the *Review of Reviews* cover almost everything, while the pros



and cons of public questions are given equal representation in the *Forum*. Questions of general literary criticism are discussed, from a conservative point of view, in "Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association" published annually for the past thirteen years by the Oxford University Press.

And when you learn the various ways of getting material on every subject you will never find it a problem to get enough. Your problem will be how to handle all you get—to sift the true and valuable from the true but not to the point and from the false. Considering how hopeless many people are of arriving at the truth—so that they sadly tell us that truth dwells at the bottom of a well—you will probably not believe me if I tell you that I have discovered a formula for arriving at the truth on any subject. This may of course be an exaggerated claim. But I can at least tell you a method which will bring you as near to the truth on any subject as contemporary thought has reached. And it is a simple problem in what the land-surveyors call triangulation that brings you there. Suppose your question to be: "What shall we do to be socially saved?" First ask yourself what answer is given by your grandfather. You will discover that your grandfather was either a Republican or a Democrat, but that the difference was largely one of class-interest, and that whether the one or the other, he believed in certain principles: individualism, freedom of

contract, and so forth. Now it is obvious that the whole truth is not there, or else by this time there would be no opposition to it, while we see those ideas being critically bombarded all the time. Then ask yourself, "What is the alternative to those ideas?" For if they are wrong the alternative is probably right. Immediately you find there are two alternative philosophies, Anarchism on the one hand and Socialism on the other hand. The Anarchist and the Socialist while agreeing in their condemnation of our present system agree in nothing else. Therefore part of the truth must be that there is something wrong with our present social system. Therefore we must regard it not with blind reverence but critically—and the critical attitude is always, in so far as it is really critical (that is intelligent, and not merely carping) a true attitude. In the first flush of this discovery about our social system you may become an Anarchist or a Socialist. But then you are stumped: there are forty brands of each. And not one of them will do you a bit of good because not one can be effective until a majority votes for it. And your own common sense tells you that the job of getting any of those doctrines into the heads of so many million people and getting them in with so much emotional accompaniment that they will cause those millions to vote, is quite impossible. Of course I know that it is, literally, inaccurate to speak of voting for anarchism but I mean it figuratively



in this instance. And so pragmatically at least the "truth" of either theory would not work and hence could hardly be called true.\* But by the time you have arrived at this point you will have discovered that our Americanism is not a pure individualism. In many departments of life we do have communism as a matter of fact. And you will have found out that most Socialists admit that in spiritual matters the individual must be free—which is anarchism. So you have escaped the fallacy that society can be saved by agreeing on any program. And you have learned that the real question is where, in order to improve our common life, must we be socialistic and where must we be libertarian. And those questions must be settled experimentally, each as it arises.

The same thing holds true of religion. We discover, as children, that there is a longer story of the creation of the earth than that brief chronicle that it was made in six days—and we immediately become Secularists and make fun of the people who still believe in the Bible. Then we discover that our going over to the extreme of Secularism was based upon an interpretation of the Bible as of "plenary inspiration" rather than upon the facts of its authorship. And so we take up some middle position.

\* This is a popular but dangerous use of the words "pragmatic" and "truth." If it represents your idea of pragmatism as a philosophy see Sidney Hook's "The Metaphysics of Pragmatism." (Open Court Publishing Company.)

And I think that in every controversial realm that you examine you will find the following process taking place:

1. A Fundamentalist position uncritically held—as we see it in religion, in politics, in the old idea that a picture must tell a story.

2. A violent reaction to the other extreme—materialism, anarchism or Socialism, non-representational painting.

3. The discovery by a member of this “left wing,” that the Fundamentalist position was not all nonsense, that there was a reason conditioning its apparent irrationality, and that if we could disengage that reason we should find a key to the puzzle. Thus we find that the Fundamentalist in religion, fantastic though he may be in his intellectual processes, is making a demand upon the universe. The materialist is trying to get on without making that demand. The Modernist asks how we can so make that demand that in some way it shall be satisfied. The Victorian admirer of Royal Academy pictures liked them to have a story. The cubist went to the other extreme and threw the story out altogether. The modernist artist throws out all of the story that cannot be told in terms of plastic art but he admits that a picture does tell a story—provided that it is not a story that should be told in words but one that only color, composition and line can tell.

In other words, the truth on any matter is



never at either extreme of opinion on that matter but is obtained, as nearly as truth can be obtained, by seeking out the causes of those extremes—the demands which each extreme testifies to—and asking how those demands can be satisfied with justice to the interests which have expressed themselves at both ends of the scale. And if the answer is exclusive of what is basic at either end it is incomplete and hence untrue. That is to say, if your answer to the political question involves the assumption that all radicals and “reds” are traitors, it is the wrong answer. On the other hand if your radicalism involve the belief that all presidents, congressmen, and policemen are oppressors of the poor, it is on the wrong track. The truth must always be a harmony of all the interests that are represented in the problem.

## CHAPTER X

### THE CRITIC'S OWN MIND

ANY person of average intelligence ought to be able to review any book of general literature—and indeed a clever writer could review a technical book that he did not understand and conceal that fact from all but the expert reader. But criticism is something else again. We might put it this way, that in reviewing a book you look at it and report what you see; in criticizing a book you look at the book, at its background, at all its implications—and report what you see.

From which it follows that no person of average intelligence or even of more than average intelligence can criticise every book that comes his way. We can only criticize books in those fields where we have some knowledge. But we need not on that account be specialists and confine ourselves to a narrow field. Indeed criticism as a discipline, or art, or mental activity is in its nature opposed to specialism, and acts as a corrective to it. The critic ought to be a person with a wide background, with a sense of life—that rather than an *a priori* philosophy—and his most important function is to weigh the books of



specialists against the claims of our general sense of life. When the specialist in biology writes a book to prove that society at large is a biological organism subject to certain laws of growth and decay, the critic need not compete with this author in detailed knowledge of biology, but he ought to know enough about society—if not by book then by his own participation in it—to challenge the biologist's assumptions, the challenge being either in terms of history or of social psychology.

Therefore to be a competent critic you should know one subject in detail—so that by personal experience one will know what scholarship involves and what research is—and you should know everything else in perspective. Or perhaps I ought to say that you should know the framework into which everything else fits. On either statement it sounds like an impossibility, a counsel of perfection, but we may at least approximate to that ideal. Professor Alfred North Whitehead has coined the term "mental climate" for the general state of ideas current at a given time. The critic should be acquainted with the mental climate of his day and know the difference between those steady trade winds on which it depends and the squalls which make spectacular eddies but which die down without having had any real influence on things. In a day when every extreme of opinion is not only vocal but incarnated in human life somewhere, in a world

where we have communism an accomplished fact in Russia and the once thought to be outmoded Manchester school of economics supreme in the United States, when Euclid has had to move over and make room for a geometry which contradicts his every axiom, when the comfortable idea that Nature moves by imperceptible and indeed continuous changes has given way to the quantum theory, when Dr. Bose of India tells us that plants are conscious and Dr. Watson of New York tells us that human beings are not conscious because there is no such thing as consciousness, when some scientists as a result of laboratory experiments with mediums posit the immortality of the soul and some Christian ministers deny it and interpret Christianity solely in terms of social psychology—in such a day how are we ever going to find out what the mental climate is, any way?

The answer is that if we take the above ideas and all the other ideas that are floating around, each on its own terms, we shall never get anywhere. But those ideas are all partial expressions of certain main tendencies, and these we can easily get hold of. Northwestern University of late years has given a course in "Contemporary Thought" under the leadership of Professor Baker Brownell. The lectures are given by specialists in the various disciplines; from those which deal with atoms to those which deal with man's spiritual values. In connection with this course Professor Brownell has written a remark-



able book, "The New Universe," in which the picture of the world as the modern man sees it—or rather of the three worlds he sees—is very plainly set forth. Those three worlds are the physical world, the world of man's practical activities, and the world of spiritual values. And as this is being written there is also in preparation, as a result of this course, a series of books, "The New World Series" in which each lecturer in the course—among them the present writer—prints his contribution to it. And there are a number of other works of a similar nature—although they should not be confused with the popular "outlines" which for the most part are quite superficial and uncritical. The reading of some of these books will give the critic at least a background to which he can relate all the different things that are happening to-day.

And it is only through the possession of such a background that the critic can sift the sense from the nonsense in contemporary writing. Just as the vernier scale on a barometer enables us to read with the naked eye a rise of the mercury which we cannot see with the naked eye, so this sort of scale of ideas enables us to make judgments in fields where we are otherwise unqualified to speak. Let me give one example of how this is possible. The reader will probably admit that he does not understand Einstein's theory of relativity—certainly the author admits it. But after reading, say "The New Universe" he will

have a general idea of Einstein's contribution. When we hear the term "the fourth dimension" used in connection with Einstein's work we shall understand that it is simply a scientific or philosophical concept which has long been a commonplace in mathematics. And so, when we find a writer on theosophy or some other form of occultism trying to tell his readers that "the fourth dimension" is a belated recognition on the part of the scientists that there really is an "astral plane" and that this dimension is the one in which spooks, spirits, elementals, ghosts, and other strange creatures cavort, we shall know that he is talking nonsense. On the other hand, if we meet an old-fashioned materialist who still believes in solid atoms which adhere to one another to form not only crystals and plants, but animals and men, we shall know, if we have only the most general conception of what is going on in modern physics, that he, too, is out of the mental climate of the present.

But suppose we meet somebody who tells us that a great teacher has arisen who has discovered a new law governing human life—it might be "the law of the octave" which is the latest thing to come to my attention, and that through the utilization of his law we can increase our mental and spiritual stature a cubit or so? What shall be our criterion? I have a simple and infallible criterion which anybody can apply. Do not be dogmatic, do not reject the idea—admit, indeed



that it is interesting, for it quite possibly is, and if it is not you are at least being polite. Then ask: How much does it cost to learn about this new truth? In the case of "the law of the octave" it was \$10 for four weekly lectures or \$2.50 at the door as you entered for each lecture. And I immediately knew that this law was nonsense.

This does not mean that I was shy the \$2.50—not any more than I usually am, that is—and it does not mean that I am making fun of the idea. I mean this seriously and literally: any idea that is urged upon your attention with the suggestion that you pay for learning about it is false—and false either for the reason that its initiator is a faker or is a lunatic. For real knowledge is always recognized by two characteristics: it is communistic and it is never pushed by propaganda. Of course it costs money to make a record of knowledge, and so I cannot write to Professor John Dewey and say: "Please send me all your books." But any one who has the price of the paper, ink, and manufacturing costs of the books, with a small sum over for the author's royalty, can buy the books, and then the ideas in them are his for the reading. The ideas expressed in this book are free—if you buy the book. And you could, possibly, make large sums of money by utilizing the ideas in this book. If so, the money would be yours—I should not have the slightest equity in it. But if I were to advertise

that I had a wonderful system of criticism, that I would teach it for a fee, perhaps with the proviso that you must not reveal the system to others—then you could be pretty sure that I was a faker.

Real knowledge is by its very nature free—it is only the machinery of transmitting knowledge that we pay for. And not only is knowledge communistic in the sense that it belongs to every one who can appropriate it by the requisite mental effort, but it is communistic in the sense that no one man created it. The gentleman who has a system based on revelation is claiming to reveal something new. The true philosopher may stress a new aspect in his thought but he also stresses the fact that this thought fits in with all other thoughts. Knowledge cannot be private in its genesis or in its application. Not only can you use freely all the ideas about education that you will find in the works of John Dewey but you can fit them into a general scheme to which all the educators from Plato down to Dewey have contributed. The first thing a reputable philosopher or scientist does is to communicate his thoughts to his peers that they may discuss them in the light of all our other knowledge. Indeed the spoken or unspoken announcement of every intellectual worker—take Darwin, for an example—is: "Here is my theory to explain this or that; please shake it thoroughly and see if it will hold together."



But do the exponents of the different schools of occultism, spiritual culture through deep breathing, lung culture through spiritual discipline, and the higher voodooism in general do that? They emphatically do not. You must pay for it and then swallow it whole or you are a skeptic, and with them the word has an almost immoral connotation.

To some readers it may seem that I am wasting space over a trivial matter, since I am addressing an audience that by hypothesis is educated. But this insistence is more justified than one would think. For so much of our education during the past generation or so has been exclusively belles-lettristic, so little has it been informed by the spirit of science, that educated people are the majority of the victims of the pseudo-philosophers. When we see the popularity of all sorts of religious cults, of such absolutely idiotic fakes as the Abrams system, when we see people with college educations changing their names because the numerologists have told them that their present names have the wrong numerical values—when we see that sort of thing, and on a wide scale, we may be pardoned for wondering if some sort of mental disintegration is not going on.

In concluding this chapter I shall recommend one more book to the critic. It is a work on logic. Most of us do our thinking and our argumentation without bothering about the rules

of formal logic. Usually this works very well, for formal logic, in Aristotle's sense, was built for a specific purpose, and has no heuristic value. If any of you who do not know Greek happen also not to know what the word heuristic means I shall answer your unspoken question in the words that an old science teacher of mine used when I, forgetful of the Greek derivation of the word, asked him what "the heuristic method" of teaching meant. He said two words to me: "Find out."

You cannot get anywhere with formal logic. On the other hand, when we hear a person say, "That's all very well in theory, but in practice it is not true" we suspect that he must have a rather inadequate idea of theory. And when we hear a person say: "This is either that way or else it is the other way, you cannot have it both ways" we may wonder if, as a matter of fact, everything is not a little this way and also a little that way. And if we are going to do any real thinking and want to avoid fallacies and be above sophisms we should at least understand the processes of our reasoning. The one book I know of that any intelligent person can understand and that explains logic not as a system but as a systematization of what is observed to occur when people think is "The Technique of Controversy; or, The Principles of Dynamic Logic," by B. B. Bogoslovsky. He bases his work upon an examination of some of the thinking actually done



by Professor Dewey in his revolutionary books on education, and from these and other exhibits he lays down four very simple principles which cover all reasoning, both inductive and deductive, which he shows to be simply two aspects of the same process.

### SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF CRITICISM

I said at the beginning of this book that critical writing was a social process. Then I meant that it was a process of give and take between people—not an artist's soliloquy understandable perhaps to a few kindred souls, perhaps to himself alone. Now I wish to end this book by saying that criticism is a social process in the more popular sense of the word. That is to say, the continuity of our life and its enhancement depend upon criticism. Human life is not just a complex mechanism built upon exchange of services, upon production that balances consumption, and upon biological inheritance. If it were that it could go on, as the life of a hill of termites goes on, in what appears to be a purely automatic way.

To be sure, the basis of human life is a material basis: we have to exchange services and we have to balance production and consumption. But that is only the beginning of the story. As a matter of fact our machinery of life has become so complicated that it threatens to overwhelm us.

Political democracy is for the moment at a standstill because its machinery is adapted to sparse or small communities where every man knows his neighbor. It still talks in terms of the town meeting and of states rights, when we do not know our fellow-townsmen and when power trusts and international combinations of capital make state boundaries obsolete and national boundaries merely titular. Our mechanical civilization has grown so large and complicated that we as individuals are swamped. New strains arise every day: only recently these strains became too great for the structure to bear and we had the world war. That was bad enough, but when we discovered that our mechanical progress, our application of chemistry and bacteriology to warfare had altogether changed its character, so that, for instance, there was no longer such a thing as a non-combatant, it was worse. And to-day the soberest thinkers tell us that civilization is in a most precarious situation. The race between education and disaster, to use H. G. Wells' phrase, is a neck and neck race. And every reactionary, every Tory, every leader of the "unexamined life," yes, every dogmatic self-styled "radical" is pulling in the direction of disaster.

In such a day the critical spirit alone can save humanity. We have our "Great Society" as Professor Dewey calls the highly technological material civilization which is all about us and



which we serve with our labor and our research, but we have not achieved his desideratum, "The Great Community." In his pregnant book "The Public and Its Problems" he tells us that the task of the next generation or so is to make a new Public, adequate to guarding all those interests which are ours as a collectivity. This does not mean that every member of the public is to study electricity because he is served by an electric light and power trust. But it does mean that every member of the public must know what his interests are in the matter of being served by such a trust, and that he shall therefore insist that the manufacturers of light and power shall be his servants, not his masters. It means that the whole technological process shall be made subordinate to human welfare, to the fuller and richer life of human individuals. And the only way this can be fully achieved is by bringing every member of the public face to face with other members: through free discussion of every public question.

Nobody knows to-day how much of our communication of spoken or written words, outside of the sheer sensationalism characteristic of our press, is propaganda for special interests. Indeed so habituated is the public to this situation that the very word criticism is misunderstood, and interpreted as fault-finding. But criticism in its wider sense is not only criticism of belles-lettres, it is the testing of ideas, the exploration of their

potentialities and implications: it is a great co-operative mental enterprise through which the individual discoveries of this man in science, of that man in public affairs, the individual enterprises of a Rockefeller in industry, a Mussolini in nation building or wrecking—whichever it may turn out to be—are evaluated, rated, given their place in the scheme of things: to the end that intelligence and goodwill shall keep that primacy without which life becomes anarchy and falls over into ruin—as it has done so often in the past when it became too complex for the man in the street to envisage it wholly and sanely and to guard effectively his stake in it.



## APPENDIX I





## APPENDIX I

### "DON'TS FOR REVIEWERS"

By Susan Warren Wilbur

IN editing the Friday Literary Review of the Chicago *Evening Post*, which uses a large number of reviews by "outside" reviewers we found that certain faults in writing were very common. The associate editor became so well acquainted with these faults that one day she wrote the following list of them in the form of a table of commandments—only there are twelve here instead of ten, they are all in the negative, and we found it more convenient to engrave them on paper rather than on tables of stone. However, they turned out to resemble those older commandments in this way: that few reviewers obeyed them all. Part of the twelfth—that part which is not negative but shows the reviewer how to write his heads and how to give the title, etc., of the book applies of course only to the Chicago *Evening Post* Literary Review. Other periodicals have other styles. For the writer it is most important that he adopt a uniform style throughout his work. Thus if you capitalize a word capitalize it all the time. If you refer in one place to a publisher as Macmillan keep on doing so. Do not say in another place "The Macmillan Company" and never, never, say Macmillan & Co., for that is not the name of the firm at all. The Macmillan Company is the name. Never use italics, for they are not in general use except for special purposes, and some newspapers could not use them in the ordinary run of matter without changing the font of a linotype machine. Nor should titles of books be written in capitals, because that

is not done in most periodicals, and everything you do in the way of inconsistent style has to be undone by an overworked editor before your copy can be given to the printer. So, with those additional cautions, here are the "Don'ts":

To be read, perhaps not before writing your review, but by all means before copying it.

1. Don't waste what space you have by complaining of your lack of it.

2. Don't quote Ecclesiastes: "of the making of books there is no end."

3. Don't use adjectives. They are all threadbare, even "seductive" and "intriguing." "Interesting" is, of course, the worst of the lot. If you find yourself saying that a book is "interesting," try instead to make your review show why it will be interesting to others besides yourself. If you find a book "dull," write a review that will reflect its particular brand of dullness—or return the book. The chances are that if its dullness were of universal application it would never have got past the publisher's readers.

4. Don't take books for the sake of filling in gaps in your education. Unless you have some knowledge of the subject or some angle upon it, the chances are that you won't be able to write anything that will be of value to the reader who seeks your guidance in his selection of books.

5. Don't take the attitude of knowing more about a subject than an author who has spent his lifetime on it. On the other hand if you should happen to catch your expert napping on some minor matter, where you happen to be particularly sure of your ground, he will probably write you a letter of thanks, and you will have made your contribution to the advancement of learning.

6. Don't treat your author, however strenuously you may disagree with him, as though he were a personal enemy. Criticism should be courteous. The English reviewers have an amusing, if somewhat stereotyped, way of managing adverse criticism. They begin by pointing out whatever merits they may find in the book, thus swathing



their home-thrusts in an appearance of good nature. American reviewers, when they roast a book, are far more likely to save the amende honorable for a last paragraph, where it usually does one of two things: either it has the appearance of canceling what has been said before, or else it sounds as acidulous as the rest.

7. Don't make copy of your ignorance of the subject you are writing about. Some people do this thinking that it makes their work sound impressionistic. It doesn't. It simply makes it sound incompetent. If some one thing gets you guessing, try the Public Library. If the whole book floats in an aura of uncertainty, you will perhaps save time by returning it.

8. Don't forget your audience. It consists firstly of the subscribers, a group of people who make a business of being well read, and whose intelligence must not be insulted; secondly of the readers of the daily paper who may chance to turn its pages, and whose status must not be insulted by such an expression, for instance, as one that actually came in a review: "a book for shopgirls." This double audience will include Catholics, Christian Scientists, plain Christians, Jews, Ku Klux Klaners. It is usually unnecessary to lacerate any one's religious or political opinions in the course of a literary review, and one ought not to do it gratuitously. This does not mean, of course, that you must sit on the fence when reviewing a book that hinges upon opinion.

9. Don't serve dinners. Some reviewers have a habit of comparing a good book to a meal of roast beef and a light one to a whipped cream tart or a box of French chocolates. In the course of a year we are served everything from "food for thought" to a Thanksgiving dinner complete, from oysters to coffee, and if we didn't keep our blue pencils busy the Friday review would soon sound like a *carte du jour*. On the other hand don't neglect any suitable means for making your stories vivid. A book review fails of half its purpose if it fails to tempt the reader.

10. Don't quote, or quarrel with, the jacket. The pur-

pose of criticism is one thing and the purpose of the book jacket quite another. Some reviewers spend so much space reviewing the jacket writer that they have scarcely enough left in which to do justice to their author. On the other hand, don't write jacket stuff yourself. "Such and such a book will be warmly welcomed by so and so's large circle of readers" is a take-off that occurs on an average of half a dozen times a week. Find some other way of indicating that the book is not a first one.

11. Don't exclaim over any bindings except the most unusual. Red cloth and blue cloth are perhaps the least unusual, and yet certain reviewers find even these materials worthy of their notice. One reviewer even went so far as to describe quite solemnly the effect of spilling a glass of water over such a cover.

12. Don't write more than one page, double-spaced, for the average popular novel, unimportant biography or elementary textbook. Don't write more than two pages for the fairly important book. And even for books of first-rate importance do not run over four—but a review of that length should be rare indeed. Writing your reviews at too great length simply means work with the blue pencil for the editors. Don't begin your review at the top of the page, but leave an inch and a half at least for the insertion of guide lines, heads, etc. If you write your own heads, they are always in two lines, at the left-hand side of the page, and each line must have not more than twenty letters and spaces in it. Here is a sample:

REALISTIC MATTER  
POETICALLY TREATED

The bottom line of this head contains eighteen letters—including the space—and as you see it almost fills the line. And notice also our style of giving the title, author, and publisher of a book: "The White Monkey," by John Galsworthy. (Charles Scribner's Sons.) \$2.50.



If the publisher's name is that of a company, spell out company with small c: (The Macmillan company.) But otherwise write it: (Dodd, Mead and Co.)—with cap C. When the publisher's imprint is an individual name, follow the style as given on the title page, but do not use "Inc." after it: (Alfred A. Knopf.), (B. W. Huebsch.)

If a book is put out by some private printing house, give the town, as: (Times-Mirror company, Los Angeles.)

Never give book titles in capitals; in the body of the story put title in quotation marks. Never use italics anywhere.





## APPENDIX II





## APPENDIX II

### A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### THE MECHANICS OF WRITING:

"New Handbook of Composition," by Edwin C. Woolley. (Heath.)

"A Manual of Style: Containing Typographical Rules, etc." (University of Chicago Press.)

Covers rules of "style"—uniformities of punctuation, etc., preparation of copy for printer, as well as much that the writer will not need—including display types and the typography of foreign languages.

#### GENERAL ÆSTHETICS:

"Toward a Theory of Art," by Lascelles Abercrombie. (London: Martin Secker.)

"The New Criticism," by Joel Elias Spingarn. (Holt.)

"First Impressions: Essays in Poetry, Criticism, and Prosody," by Llewellyn Jones. (Knopf.)

#### PHILOSOPHY:

"Moral Philosophy: The Critical View of Life," by Warner Fite. (Lincoln MacVeagh.)

#### CRITICISM IN AMERICA:

"American Criticism," by Norman Foerster. (Houghton Mifflin.)

In which a point of view quite different from that of the present work will be found.

## CONCERNING THE NOVEL:

"The Craft of Fiction," by Percy Lubbock. (Scribner.)

"Aspects of the Novel," by E. M. Forster. (Harcourt, Brace.)

"Æsthetics of the Novel," by Van Meter Ames. (University of Chicago Press.)

The first work in the æsthetics of the novel, as far as I know, to be written from the point of view of pragmatism. I doubt the validity of the author's distinction between sensuous and literary art.

## PRACTICAL:

"Writing and Editing for Women," by Ethel Colson Brazelton. (Funk & Wagnalls.)

Contains a chapter on book reviewing.

## ABOUT THINKING:

"The Technique of Controversy: Principles of Dynamic Logic," by B. B. Bogoslovsky. (Harcourt, Brace.)

THE END

















